

# State Election Housing Forum Final Report

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## BACKGROUND

In October 2000, and with the forthcoming State election in Western Australia, Shelter WA decided to hold a pre-election housing forum and to invite politicians from the key political parties to speak on their social housing policy platform.

It quickly became evident that there was interest in the forum and the timing could not have been better. Politicians from the Liberal Party, Australian Labor Party, Australian Democrats and the WA Greens had agreed to speak and people were travelling from regional WA to attend. Was housing on the political agenda? Certainly the written media was showing some interest.

## OVERVIEW

Whilst there has since been a change of government, we should be encouraged by the fact that key commitments were consistent albeit at differing levels. There was support from each speaker for the ongoing maintenance of public housing to current levels and the increase of community housing and that this be achieved through a review of current programs and lobbying for the next round of the CSHA.

There was also consensual support for the development of a State Homelessness Strategy, to work towards resolving the homelessness problems in WA, particularly for the most marginalised including people living with mental health issues and/or substance dependence, refugees on temporary visas, young people and Aboriginal people.

Also the promotion of a review of the residential tenancies legislation in WA was keenly supported with particular consideration for legislation for boarders and lodgers. The need to work inclusively with an across portfolio approach to the delivery of social housing was acknowledged as was the link between adequate and appropriate housing and community wellbeing.

## SUMMARY OF SPEECHES

*Shawn Boyle, Executive Director, WA Council of Social Service (WACOSS)*

Shawn introduced the forum to the broad picture debate in terms of the links between housing and a range of social and economic factors in the context of stronger, healthier communities.

He referred to the release in late 2000 of the WACOSS report '*Healing the Social Divide*'. The key elements referred to in that report was of building a community partnership whilst improving people's health and wellbeing, valuing families and children and investing in crime prevention and justice.

Shawn stressed the current '*bankrupt approach*' of getting the economics right then fixing the social issues was making it difficult for the sector to cope with resolving the social issues and assisting need. He stated policy is about '*inter-connectiveness*' between social and economic factors. That the impact of recent reforms such as accountability and accreditation requirements, competitive tendering, tax and industrial reform within the sector without any assistance package and whilst the dollars are being squeezed has meant the sector is struggling to cope.

He reinforced the concept of prevention or early intervention with a holistic approach to planning making for stronger communities. Particularly with the focus on families linked to their health and wellbeing. That the key to success is to include the community in the planning rather than low level input towards the end of the process.

*Hon Kim Hames, Minister for Housing, Liberal Party*

The former Minister opened by confirming the correlation between inadequate housing and poor social outcomes in a climate of poor economic and environmental factors. He considered the New Living Program under the Ministry of Housing was evidence of the progress made in tackling the problems of the old public housing estates in WA.

In terms of the future he endorsed the need for a strategic planning approach to housing delivery and referred to the recent work on the document '*Housing 2029*' through the Office of Housing Policy. He stated the aim is to '*identify the strengths and weaknesses of the wider housing system and to make sure that we develop policies that enable us to bridge the gaps that exist...this helps to provide a whole of government approach to housing which has been lacking in the past*'

In providing for the needs of people on low income or with a diversity of needs in both the metropolitan and regional WA, the Minister informed the forum that the cornerstone of their housing policy is home ownership. And that the current home ownership programs and safety net provisions to assist low income people into owning their own homes is a successful alternative housing option. However the Coalition is still committed to maintaining public housing in WA at a minimum of 5.3%, the current rate.

He informed the forum that 1,200 housing units had been demolished under the New Living Program and a significant number of these units had been sold to Homeswest tenants. He stated the latest figures show that the current figure is 38,556 houses compared with 35,135 in 1991. Since 1993, the waiting list was at 17,766 compared to the current rate of 12,879, meaning a reduction of nearly 5,000 people on the waiting list.

With it's stock replacement program, Homeswest have concentrated on seniors housing to deal with the aging population. The Coalition would commit to continuing that focus on seniors through the provision of security and maintenance programs. They would also introduce a Home Maintenance Advisory Service for all seniors on the basis of a discounted assessment or check list service similar to that of the RAC. The package would include recommended trades persons and making available loans for maintenance purposes. The Coalition would also commit to undertaking a review of the Residential Tenancy Act if returned to government. The review would include widespread public consultation.

On the matter of Indigenous housing, the Aboriginal Home Ownership Scheme is something the Coalition are keen to encourage. He informed the forum that programs are in place for remote communities and these include the Aboriginal Community Strategic Investments Program (ACSIP) which aims to improve housing standards in these communities. There is also the Management Support Program (MSP) which allows Aboriginal people to be responsible for maintenance and upgrades of housing. Aboriginal people are paid and trained under this program. The Coalition also committed to the expansion of community housing in WA, particularly the Community Disability Housing Program (CDHP) as well as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

Finally, in acknowledging the homelessness issue in WA he endorsed the proposal of a State Homelessness Strategy being developed during the next term.

*Hon Ken Travers, Australian Labor Party and Opposition Spokesperson for Housing*  
Mr Travers informed the forum that the Labor Party is committed to the rights of everyone to a secure, affordable and appropriate housing. He referred to the current health crisis and acknowledged that access to secure and affordable housing is fundamental to improving the health outcomes of society. He stated an indicator is that children of people who own their homes will remain in school for longer however acknowledged other factors also contribute.

Whilst home ownership is a priority, the ALP is committed to providing the options for low income rental housing for people who cannot afford, or where it is not appropriate to access home ownership. He acknowledged governments have a responsibility to provide the appropriate support services to assist people into housing. He referred to the current Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement (CSHA) stating the objectives of the 1996 CSHA were '*far better*' than the current Agreement. He also referred to the work of Diana Warnock in attempting to keep low income, affordable housing in the East Perth Redevelopment area.

Regarding Homeswest, Mr Travers commented '*...when you look at the total amount of money that has been spent on capital works for housing within Western Australia over the last eight years of the current coalition government it averages out at about \$137 million a year. That is over \$1 billion.*' '*....but has it produced any results?*

He went on to make the following observations, that there have been:

- Rent increases from 21.7% to 25% for new public housing tenants.
- \$60 million more was spent in 1992/93 than under the current construction program.
- A net loss of 600 houses on last year's figures.
- A net loss of 2,800 bedrooms with the trend from the construction of three to four bedroom accommodation to one and two bedroom.
- Waiting lists figures have reduced from approximately 17,000 to 14,000 when there has not been a corresponding number of houses constructed in the same period.

Finally, Mr Travers on behalf of the ALP endorsed a review of the residential tenancies legislation in WA. He also questioned why the government had rejected the recommendations in 1998 to abolish letting fees in WA and stated the ALP would be keen to re-open the matter of letting fees.

*Hon Norm Kelly, Housing Spokesperson, Australian Democrats.*

Mr Kelly informed the forum the Australian Democrats acknowledge the strong links between housing and a range of social and economic factors. That a needs analysis of housing should be done before governments decide what is an appropriate level of funding and that the commitment to meeting the criteria should be honoured.

He stated shelter is a basic human need and the Australian Democrats endorse the view of the United Nations that access to adequate housing is a fundamental right and that this should be the basis on which housing policies are made.

He further stated '*Lack of access to adequate housing impacts on individuals life chances with detrimental flow on effects to education, health and employment opportunities...this leaves many people in need and reinforces the social inequities.*'

He referred to the lack of adequate housing as perpetuating the existing cycle of disadvantage. Non-government agencies are required to provide greater assistance and are required to be more accountable, however the resources are not provided to match those demands.

The Australian Democrats also encourage strategies to assist home buyers to build up deposits through options which include the use of superannuation assets for a deposit and the provision of a tax rebate for medium term savings.

Mr Kelly stated the democrats strongly endorse progressive laws that provide adequate protection for renters in particular the introduction of legislation which improves security of tenure and extends to boarders and lodgers. A tenants rights charter in Western Australia is strongly encouraged.

He also encouraged the formulation of responses to the current housing crisis facing Aboriginal people, those living with mental illness, holders of temporary protection visas, regional West Australians in need of housing assistance, young people and other marginalised groups. And that those people needing support be provided with the necessary services to assist integration into the community.

He also referred to the issue of people leaving prison and the need to facilitate the transition to residency as easily and quickly as possible. There is also the matter of the level of crisis accommodation and refuges to meet need. The Democrats encourage guaranteed funding for refuges, half way houses and other accommodation alternatives and endorse the additional funds be made available for SAAP services.

*Hon Giz Watson, The Greens Party*

Ms Watson also acknowledged the fundamental importance of housing and raised concerns on apparent trends away from community and social housing with the push towards the private rental with the result be lessening choices available to people. She emphasised the need for a vision in developing alternative housing models based on the principle of viable and efficient housing and an integrated management system with links to support.

Giz raised serious concerns about the number of people waiting for public housing whether the true figures quoted at the forum be 12,000 or 17,000. That the figures will not be a true indication of need as so many people needing low income housing are simply not applying due to so many barriers in accessing public housing. She also referred to the homelessness crisis in WA and the lessening rights for the lower income sectors in private and public housing.

The WA Greens are keen to work towards boarders and lodgers legislation in WA and will progress that work into 2001. Appropriate design is another issue, particularly culturally appropriate housing for Aboriginal people. She had experienced in the Kimberley, Aboriginal people living on the verandah because the recently constructed houses were so hot. The design was that of a standard house in Perth with no consideration for local environmental or cultural factors.

The WA Greens are also committed to the development of a State Homelessness Strategy, and encourage a '*grassroots strategy*' rather than a '*top down approach*'.

Another matter the WA Greens are also concerned with is that of access to housing for people living with mental health issues. Particularly for these and other low socio-economic groups is the need for access to housing in inner city redevelopment such

as East Perth and Subiaco, close to services and public transport rather than being forced into the outer suburbs away from the necessary services.

In conclusion she referred to the discrimination issues raised in the forum's background Discussion Paper, stating one group not identified was that of gay and lesbian people discriminated against when accessing housing.