

Homes not hedge funds

Antipoverty Centre statement to the Senate Economics Legislation Committee hearing for the housing legislative package bill inquiry | 14 March 2023

Statement delivered by Mel Powersmith

I join this hearing from Jagera and Turrbal Country, and pay respect to Elders across the continent. The Antipoverty Centre recognises the welfare systems of so-called Australia that we seek to change are a tool of colonial violence.

The experts in poverty and inequality are the people who live it.

I lived in community housing. My experience was so harmful my psychologist told me to get out. There's a human cost to residualisation – the targeting that creates concentrated communities of people with complex support needs.

My colleague Kristin is likely to have no home in two weeks. She's on the waiting list for social housing, years away from help. She's discriminated against by landlords because she relies on Centrelink. She spends nearly all her payment on rent to live near her doctors.

We're in this situation because of a dramatic policy shift – governments decided to rely on the private rental market to house people on low incomes, rather than ensure access to public housing for everyone who wants it.

A safe, secure home is an investment in people's lives and futures, but you see it as a cost.

With this housing plan, the government isn't just choosing to continue policies like negative gearing and rent assistance that fail us, but to make things worse by gambling potential social homes on the stock market.

This approach is not good for people in poverty. It's only good for the investment managers, the property developers, and the landlords – both individual and institutional – who'll get their hands on public money.

It's the kind of plan that gets cooked up when you put the foxes in charge of the henhouse – the people you call "experts".



There's something even worse than this obsession with market-at-all-costs.

The way the government designed this fund means it could deliver zero homes if, as the Future Fund 2022 annual report predicts, investment returns are lower than they've been in the past.

The Housing Australia Future Fund is not a solution to the housing crisis. In 5 years, we'll be further behind than we are now. It should be thrown out.

It is time for government to listen to those of us who know and take urgent action to meaningfully improve our housing security.

That brings me to the farcical Housing Supply and Affordability Council, which is led by a property developer. In our submission have provided specific proposals about how the composition of the council must be changed.

The bottom line is this: vested interests need to get out, and people who need homes included. The real experts – people with direct experience of homelessness, social housing residualisation and severe housing stress in the private market – must have a prominent role on the council.

We urge the government not to bet our lives and futures on the stock market, or the kindness of property investors. We have provided you with many alternatives. Go beyond this bill and do something meaningful to leave a legacy Labor can be proud of.

Take your responsibilities seriously. Work with us and other levels of government urgently to protect renters. Then move away from targeting and policies that have undermined housing affordability, towards universal access. Directly invest in beautiful, high quality public homes that people want to live in so every person's basic right to safe shelter is upheld.