



# **COUNTERFUTURES**

---

Left thought & practice Aotearoa



## Fractured Fightback

Some thoughts on why it's so hard for the left to get its act together on the housing crisis – and what we might do about it

Sue Bradford

**T**HERE IS A massive housing crisis unfolding in Aotearoa at present. It is acute, complex and diverse in its impacts. By February 2016 the median weekly rent across Auckland had risen to \$568pw for a three bedroom house.<sup>1</sup> The median house

price at the same time was around \$720,000.<sup>2</sup> Working fulltime on the minimum wage of \$14.75 an hour brings in \$590pw gross. Benefits, student allowances and part time wages are usually much lower. The fundamental mismatch is clear. Reports of people trading sex for somewhere to sleep, families living in cars, and hot bunking in apartments are becoming increasingly frequent.

On 17 February Finance Minister Bill English took the Government's push towards privatisation of social housing to a blatant new level when he told a meeting of fund managers that fully private share market companies could 'step into the space' within five years, in the same way as they've done in the residential care and retirement village sector.<sup>3</sup>

Every day our group Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) sees the face of what's happening. People come to us because Work and Income now administers the assessment of people's eligibility for state housing as well as benefits, and because we are often a destination of last resort for people who have no place else to go.

We know there are many other groups who care and who are taking action in various ways, from building houses and providing services to the homeless, through to maintaining national advocacy organisations like the Coalition to End Homelessness, the Community Housing Association and Te Matapihi He Tirohanga Mo Te Iwi (peak sector body for Māori housing).

In the August issue of *Foreign Control Watchdog* John Minto wrote an excellent article about National's moves to privatise large numbers of state houses, and spoke of the work of the State Housing Action Network which grew out of the long, courageous struggle of some state house tenants to hold on to their homes and their communities.<sup>4</sup>

1 Scott Yeoman, 'Tenants dig deep for a place to call home', *New Zealand Herald*, 31 January 2016.

2 Greg Ninness, 'Downturn hits Auckland housing market with prices and sales volumes falling substantially last month', *Property*, 11 February 2016.

3 Hamish Rutherford, 'Retirement village-type companies will enter social housing in 5 years: English', *Stuff*, 16 February 2016.

4 John Minto, 'National begins NZ's biggest privatisation of state assets',

In late 2015 AAAP played a key organising role in a temporary coalition of organisations lead by the Child Poverty Action Group organising a Hikoi for Homes, which took place on 21 November, with marches in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.<sup>5</sup>

So it's not as if nothing is being done.

However, from the micro detail of the daily work of front line organisations through to the big picture on housing, we are up against a multi-armed complex of power and money, which makes it really easy for us to stay divided, weak and impotent.

Even after years of crisis no sustainable coalition or united front – locally, regionally or nationally – has emerged to challenge the capitalist agenda on housing. Casual talk of a national housing ‘movement’ challenging government, local government and business on key aspects of the crisis is illusory. If it exists, it is not visible from our activist base in Auckland.

Our different sites of struggle, and disagreement over definitions, priorities and tactics, often serve to keep us apart. They will continue to weaken us unless we find ways of moving past them. I am not naïve. Some divisions will never be bridged, for all sorts of very good reasons.

If we begin to see more clearly what divides us, however, perhaps some of us might be better prepared to build organisations capable of taking on housing politically in a more effective way than we've done up to now. As is so often said, crises create opportunities. But unless there are organisations ready and able to take effective action, those opportunities will be lost and little will change.

In this article I will first identify some of the fracture points and barriers to momentum I see in the housing area, before going on to propose a few ideas as to possible ways forward. This is in no way offered as a comprehensive academic overview, nor as some kind of monolithic political solution. Rather, the goal is to provide

*Foreign Control Watchdog*, 139, 44-46.

5 Child Poverty Action Group, 'Hikoi for homes: Major marches and rallies tomorrow', *Scoop*, 20 November 2015.

a starting point for further conversations that I believe some of us engaged with the housing crisis need to have. Successfully confronting the crisis can also be seen as a key component of how we might better, and more broadly, confront and challenge capitalism itself in Aotearoa.

### Existing state house tenants... primacy?

State house tenants have been fighting an often rear guard action to keep their homes and communities intact in places like Glen Innes, Maraenui, Porirua and Pomare, where Housing New Zealand (HNZ) is implementing intensification and privatisation projects. In northern Glen Innes, for example, 156 HNZ properties are being redeveloped to create 260 or more new houses, the majority of which are for private sale.

National demands a dividend from state housing while running down the stock. This financial year \$118 million is expected to be transferred to the Crown at the same time as HNZ has become Aotearoa's biggest slum landlord, following decades of deliberate neglect. Simultaneously they are working to transfer up to 8,000 houses, out of a current total stock of 67,000, to non-state providers over the next few years.

Those who have spent their lives believing the original Labour promise that a state house was for life are justifiably outraged that this contract has been broken. Tenancies are now subject to three year reviews, and at other times HNZ makes no bones about evicting people whom they deem to have breached their tenancy rules in some form. Recently AAAP has tried to help several families subject to eviction or 90 day notice from HNZ where there are large numbers of children involved. There is no legal way to prevent these people losing their homes, yet the consequences will be disastrous, with little likelihood that the families will be able to access housing in the private sector either.

At the same time as existing tenants are battling to keep their homes, queues for state housing keep growing. Even though it is extremely difficult to get on to the waiting list now, with tight criteria in place, the 'priority A' queue in Auckland increased from

941 households in June to 1200 at the end of September 2015. Priority A is defined as people ‘at risk and including households with a severe and persistent housing need that must be addressed immediately’.<sup>6</sup> In practice, AAAP finds that even people with disabilities, illness and/or with children who are sleeping rough or in a car that night, are not necessarily placed on the state house waiting list, or assisted into any other housing option.

Nor is HNZ making anything like adequate progress in building or acquiring more state houses to meet this need. By the end of June 2015, HNZ had only completed 666 of the meagre 2,000 homes it had promised to build in that financial year – only 247 of these were built outside Christchurch.<sup>7</sup>

In late October 2015 Paula Bennett went on the offensive against prospective tenants. She told the annual CHA conference that National was about to introduce a stand down period for those who turn down state houses for reasons she termed unacceptable, including ‘birds chirping in the trees next door’.<sup>8</sup> Those with desperate housing needs are belittled as the screws are tightened. I suspect vulnerable people are less likely to be able to access a state house now than at any time since the scheme was introduced in the late 1930s by the first Labour government.

The struggles of state housing tenants are vitally important, so why has resistance become so fractured? Everyone I know on the Left has huge sympathy for those who are fighting to keep their homes, and supports their demands around security of tenure and opposition to privatisation. The problems seem to arise when people put state housing on a pedestal, without perhaps sufficiently acknowledging the validity of the needs of many others, including those who are desperate for access to any home at all, and others who aspire to home ownership. Further, there is, at times, a lack of awareness of the progressive, helpful solutions potentially offered by the local government bodies, not-for-profit and tangata whenua sectors, as well as via the state.

6 Simon Collins, ‘Housing queue grows as system “hits trough”’, *New Zealand Herald*, 22 October 2015.

7 Richard Meadows, ‘Housing New Zealand misses new homes target’, *Stuff*, 27 October 2015.

8 Sam Sachdeva, ‘Plans to bump people off state housing list ‘unwarranted attack’ – Labour’, *Stuff*, 22 October 2015.

## Definitions of 'social housing' ... a deep division

The division between some state housing and other community based housing activists has come to a head in recent times around the definition of 'social housing'. The Oxford Dictionary definition of social housing is 'Housing provided for people on low incomes or with particular needs by government agencies or non-profit organisations.' As someone who has worked with the community housing sector in Aotearoa off and on for some decades, this is a definition with which most housing activists I know are likely to agree. While it is a term that has come into relatively recent usage, it has been useful because it offers a single, simple concept which covers housing provided for low income and other people in housing difficulties by government and local government, and by organisations based in the community and tangata whenua sector.

As governments are wont to do, they picked up the term once it came into common usage in the community sector. 'Social housing' is now used frequently in legislation and there is even a Social Housing Minister, in the person of Paula Bennett. This is the generic term National now uses to describe its policies and actions in regards to both state and community based housing, including activities like the Tamaki Transformation project, which is ripping the heart out of the old Glen Innes state housing community, and the move to sell off state houses into the not-for-profit and potentially the private sector as well.

And this is, I believe, the root of the problem. Because the term 'social housing' has become tangled up with National's policies on housing, some state housing campaigners have come to believe that all social housing is somehow evil or wrong. This is even when it includes the very state houses tenants are fighting to defend, along with other forms of not-for-profit community based housing provided for people on low incomes.

This leads to a second point of difference, highlighted by a statement John Minto makes in his recent article in which he says 'Across the world only governments have the resources and capacity to provide quality affordable housing for families and tenants on low incomes.'<sup>9</sup>

9 John Minto, *ibid*, p.46.

In contrast, a fair number of us believe that while at this stage only the state has the capacity to be the major provider of social housing to low income people and those with other vulnerabilities, local government and the non-profit sector should also be enabled and supported to play a role as well. While the community housing sector is weak in Aotearoa compared to what has been achieved in other comparable jurisdictions, there is still a proud history of activism by people who provide and support various forms of cooperative, community owned, emergency and iwi, hapū and whānau housing. To denigrate the idea of social housing beyond the state is to denigrate their past and current efforts, as well as disregarding the whole concept of people doing it for ourselves rather than leaving everything to the state.

It is a political debate worth having, but from my own radical Left perspective I believe that the state should not be the only provider of social housing, and that there is a crucial role that could and should be played by community, cooperative and tangata whenua initiatives.

### What is 'affordability'? ... a further definitional confusion

A second confusion over definition has arisen over the term 'affordable'. Some state housing activists seem to believe that this, too, is somehow a derogatory or offensive term because of how it is sometimes used to describe houses being offered for sale below certain, ever rising limits in Auckland. As of November 2015, 'affordable' homes in Auckland were officially described as those under \$578,250, 75 percent of the median house price.<sup>10</sup> For people on low to middle incomes this is manifestly *not* an affordable price.

In Glen Innes, as elsewhere, such 'affordable' houses are included in project plans under 'special housing area' rules, requiring that a certain percentage of such homes be built as a trade-off for private developments. As with the term 'social housing', some activists have come to interpret the term only in the sense and context given by the government.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Collins & Anne Gibson, '102 houses built out of target of 39,000', *New Zealand Herald*, 6 November 2015.

Others of us, however, simply see the term ‘affordable’ as conveying its original meaning: housing which low and medium income people can afford to rent or buy.

I don’t know whether this happens elsewhere, but in Auckland people who have spent their lives working for improved access to state, local government and community housing, have recently been criticised and regarded with suspicion for making references to ‘social housing’ and ‘affordability’. Whose interests does this serve? Talking past each other doesn’t help us confront our common enemies.

## Community housing providers

The community housing sector has its own problems too. For ten years Community Housing Aotearoa (CHA) has been the national umbrella group for councils and non-profit community based organisations who are building and/or providing social housing. According to CHA, community housing organisations currently provide over 4,000 homes, while local councils provide 13,400.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most visible splits is found between those groups who support the moving of state houses from places like Glen Innes to alternative locations, and those who don’t. Ricky Houghton, the He Korowai Trust CEO, created controversy when his organisation worked with HNZ to bring a number of Glen Innes state houses to Kaitaia to help create their social housing pilot there.

Seeing their homes trucked north added fuel to the flames of tenant anger in Tamaki. The relocations stopped after HNZ felt the situation had become too unsafe.<sup>12</sup> With huge housing shortages in Auckland, and tenants standing up for the right to remain in their own homes, it was not only state house tenants, but also some other community housing activists, who felt this situation was wrong and made no sense. It was argued that state houses should

11 ‘A safe pair of hands’, Community Housing Aotearoa, accessed 23 February 2015, [http://www.communityhousing.org.nz/files/8414/2716/3278/CHA-CHO\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.communityhousing.org.nz/files/8414/2716/3278/CHA-CHO_fact_sheet.pdf)

12 Lois Williams, ‘Maori home ownership scheme stymied’, Radio New Zealand, 18 February 2015.

not be relocated to the north when housing need remained critical in Auckland, and that tenants deserved the right to remain in their own communities and homes.

The Kaitaia scheme has not been a success. At the time of writing, I understand that most if not all of the relocated state houses remain vacant for a range of reasons, and that there have been issues with sabotage of the properties. There have been other problems for the He Korowai Trust too, with it running into difficulties around its ability, or otherwise, to retain charitable status.<sup>13</sup>

Further differences within the community housing sector have emerged around questions of how far groups should go in regards the compromises inherent in accepting and complying with Government strategies. One example of this is the move to sell off 8,000 state houses to not-for-profit providers. National has found it difficult to come up with groups who will buy into this, with large organisations like the Salvation Army and Habitat for Humanity making it clear they would not be involved in the project as it currently stands. In March 2015, spokesman Campbell Roberts told media that the Salvation Army's own research proved that even an organisation as large as theirs did not have the resources or capacity to buy up large quantities of often rundown state housing stock. Nor could they 'guarantee that we would be able to improve things for state tenants'.<sup>14</sup>

By late October 2015 Paula Bennett was demonstrating considerable frustration at the lack of pickup, and advised providers to form consortiums and go to the banks for loans.<sup>15</sup> That thousands of former state houses might be sold to Australian community housing providers continues to lurk in the background, with local organisations not always in agreement as how to respond to this possibility.

13 Peter Jackson, 'Waiting game for He Korowai', *The Northland Age*, 29 September 2015.

14 Alex Ashton, 'Salvation Army won't buy state houses', Radio New Zealand, 23 March 2015.

15 Vernon Small, 'Paula Bennett shows signs of frustration at pace of housing take-up', *Stuff*, 22 October 2015.

The fracture running through this sector lies between groups who wish to remain autonomous and in a position to critique government policies and practices, and those who are open to sometimes substantial compromises in a bid to achieve their goals. This gap is not peculiar to the housing arena, but highlights differences in a community sector that has been deeply affected by the last few decades of government colonisation via a combination of charities law and government funding practice, both of which demand compliance and silence in return for charitable status for tax purposes – and contracts.

## Homelessness

The crisis of homelessness is growing in this country. The national body of organisations working with and for homeless people defines homelessness as: ‘Living situations where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing are: without shelter; in temporary accommodation; sharing accommodation with a household; or living in uninhabitable housing.’<sup>16</sup>

The 2013 Census revealed that thousands of people were living in shacks, garages, cars, other improvised shelters and out in the open. Two years on, it was reported that Auckland boarding houses were ‘filled to the brim’, and Alan Johnson from the Salvation Army’s policy unit said ‘The housing stock has reached saturation point... we’re even struggling to find places for people to stay overnight, for example in motels; even the motels are full, even for emergency accommodation’.<sup>17</sup>

The experience of Auckland Action Against Poverty matches these reports. Like other frontline welfare and advocacy groups, we are constantly overwhelmed by our inability to meet even the most desperate needs of people who are sleeping in a car or in a park, with no other options for a roof over their head. There is usually nowhere a group like ours can send people for emergency

16 ‘Welcome to the NZCEH website’, NZ Coalition to End Homelessness, accessed 23 February 2015, <http://nzceh.org.nz/>

17 Nicole Pryor, ‘Desperate families resort to boarding’, Radio New Zealand, 8 July 2015.

accommodation, as every place is full. At best we can sometimes arrange a short term motel stay if Work and Income agrees to an advance payment. If we take someone's situation to the media the best case scenario is that they rise to the top of the state housing queue, with the net result that another equally deserving family is shoved down to the next place on the list and has a longer wait.

All kinds of people are affected. In August 2015 a Māori midwifery advisor in central Auckland reported that she was currently caring for three pregnant women who were sleeping rough.<sup>18</sup> This matches AAAP experience where state housing allocation is focused on families with children. Pregnancy does not count, unless a mother already has other children in her care. Adults without children have virtually no chance of getting on to the priority waiting list. At AAAP I recently met an elderly woman with a major physical impairment who had been sleeping rough for a year. I asked her how she had spent the previous night, 'Wrapped up in blankets in a bus shelter' she replied. She was desperate for a place to call home, but neither HNZ nor MSD would accept responsibility for housing her.

In October 2015 Auckland's Housing Call to Action group reported that: approximately one in every 120 people in Aotearoa is homeless; that about half of the homeless are in employment or studying; most are under the age of 25; and that those sleeping rough are just the tip of the iceberg, with families making up the majority of the homeless, who are often hidden from public or media visibility.<sup>19</sup>

Those dealing with desperate people in the area of homelessness on a daily basis don't tend to be divided about what's happening. Everybody is too busy doing what they can to help people survive. There are, however, some differences in understanding and approach which can, at times, undermine efforts in practice and in advocacy, to which I will now turn.

18 Lauren Priestley, 'Pregnant women among rising number of homeless in NZ cities', *New Zealand Herald*, 20 August 2015.

19 Housing Call to Action, 'Spotlight on housing kicks off week about homelessness', *Scoop*, 5 October 2015.

*Which overseas models should we learn from? Should we look overseas at all?*

There is now a huge variety of models and experiences to learn from given the development over many years of homelessness services and programmes in places like the US. Sam Tsemberis from the Housing First programme in the US recently visited Aotearoa and spoke of their alternative to many of the more charity focused initiatives there.<sup>20</sup> The Housing First approach makes providing people with stable ongoing housing a priority over emergency shelters and programmes, which require people to be clean of alcohol and drugs before they are housed. The tension between finding non moralistic and long term solutions over moralistic and short term assistance is ongoing, although a huge part of the problem in Aotearoa is, simply, the fundamental lack of government commitment to the provision of decent, secure housing in any context – whether state, council or community-based. There is also the ongoing question as to what extent we should be looking to international models in the first case, as opposed to learning from local projects and experiences, both historically and in the present.

*Families with children vs. the needs of adults who are not living with children*

As already alluded to above, there is an ongoing tension between the needs of those who have children and those who don't. The popularity of children as the worthy object of charitable works and government support, rather than the adults who raise the children, is seen in the policies of most parliamentary parties. This can be identified most acutely in the prioritisation of families on state house waiting lists. Emergency accommodation is similarly rationed in favour of families, not necessarily because providers don't understand the needs of childless adults, but because they lack the resources to do any more than they already are.

The Child Poverty Action Group has carried out excellent research around the significant negative impacts on children of

<sup>20</sup> Tom Carnegie, 'Homelessness could end in NZ with Housing First approach', Stuff, 21 October 2015.

transient, inadequate and substandard housing.<sup>21</sup> There is a need to address this issue at all levels of housing policy and practice. This should not, however, lead us to ignore questions of adult income (wages and benefits) and of the housing needs of childless adults in difficulty. Many people who are in severe need – for such reasons as mental and physical illness, disability, and pregnancy – find themselves homeless, and are resentful that it's much easier for families to access housing. People with, or recovering from, mental illness and addictions are particularly vulnerable.

### *Awareness of rural and Māori housing needs*

In some rural and heavily Māori districts, like Te Tai Tokerau and Te Tairāwhiti, homelessness and substandard housing are intergenerational issues that have been exacerbated by the government's withdrawal from state housing provision in recent decades. Despite much good work, it is still difficult for iwi, hapū and whānau to even build on their own papakāinga land. Resources for Māori housing initiatives have been repeatedly cut back, one of the most hurtful in recent times being the sudden end to the government initiative that had promised help for upgrading substandard rural housing. Housing activists in the city often have little awareness of the depth of homelessness in parts of rural and provincial Aotearoa, and of the lack of resourcing which goes into any form of social housing in these areas. National's willingness to take state houses out of one low income district in Auckland and send them to another low income district in the far north epitomises, very directly, how it has tried to capitalise on geographical separation – rather unsuccessfully, one might add.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that in October 2015 a new Māori Housing Network was established, under the auspices of Te Puni Kōkiri, with the goal of supporting Māori-led housing programmes and capability.<sup>22</sup> The new Network has a total pūtea of

21 See, for example, the section on housing in Claire Dale, Mike O'Brien & Susan St John, 'Our children our choice', Child Poverty Action Group, Auckland 2014.

22 Te Ururoa Flavell, 'Māori Housing Network to build on Māori housing success', Government media release, 3 October 2015.

\$14.491 million per year. When considered in the context of Māori housing and homelessness, and of the Government's overall budget, this is a desultory and insulting level of support.

### *Auckland, foreign investment and xenophobia*

In July 2015, Labour MP Phil Twyford created a furore when he released confidential real estate data that he claimed showed people with Chinese surnames 'are a very significant part of what's going on' in Auckland's overheated property market.<sup>23</sup> Reactions were mixed, but there is no doubt Twyford's comments stimulated interest in levels of foreign investment in Auckland property, as well as feeding latent xenophobia. Chinese people felt they had been subject to racism from Twyford. For example, newspaper editor David Soh said he was 'disappointed his fellow countrymen had been singled out', and real estate agent Eric Chase argued Twyford's comments exhibited 'colonialist, xenophobic thinking'.<sup>24</sup>

The heated debate arising from Twyford's intervention brought to the fore the total lack of any meaningful data on overseas buyers. Government measures, which came into force on 1 October, require foreign investors to provide a New Zealand IRD number with a New Zealand bank account. This will mean more information will be available in future, but at time of writing it is too early for useful data to have appeared yet.

Shortly after Twyford's intercession, Deputy-Governor of the Reserve Bank Grant Spencer delivered a speech to the Northern Club in Auckland, in which he pointed out that prices were now nine times higher than the average income in Auckland, up from six in 2012; that only 8,300 dwellings a year were being added, nowhere near enough to meet demand; and that investors were now responsible for 41 percent of Auckland sales as of June 2015, up from 33 percent in late 2013.<sup>25</sup>

23 'Leaked data shows Chinese offshore buyers fuelling 'rampant' Auckland property speculation, Twyford says', *NBR*, 11 July 2015.

24 Chris Chang, 'Labour housing remarks 'colonialist, xenophobic' says auctioneer while Chinese plan to 'speak up'', *One News*, 14 July 2015.

25 Grant Spencer, 'Investors adding to Auckland housing risk', *NBR*, 24

There is no question that property investors play a key role in keeping prices high in Auckland, although the obvious corollary of this is that they are buying the houses and flats which desperate renters need in order to have somewhere to live. It is also widely accepted that a percentage of this investment does come from foreign buyers. However, as already noted, there is no way at present of knowing how much of this is sourced from which country.

For people on the Left, the fracture lies here between those who strongly resist any attempts to use racist statements and beliefs to allocate blame for the housing situation in Auckland, and those who buy into it. If propagated by those with influence in the community, racism and xenophobia can have a tendency to take root and flourish, including among people who are experiencing deep housing pressure themselves. We need to be particularly wary of resorting to anything remotely racist in what we say and how we work. It can provide a 'quick hit' for popular support, but comes at the expense of promulgating an understanding of the deeper structural dynamics at play.

### *Is it OK to want to own your own home, one day?*

There is one more division among Left activists worth mentioning. Many of the younger friends with whom AAAP works are part of the 'generation rent', as described by Shamubeel and Selena Eaqub in their recent book.<sup>26</sup> The current generation of potential first home buyers encounter major obstacles when trying to achieve their dream, including homes costing up to nine times the annual median income, and tenants lacking long term tenure or sufficient protection from wayward and nit-picking landlords. There is huge frustration in feeling you've been denied the chance to buy your own home, whilst simultaneously being subjected to a lifetime of renting in a market where tenancy laws and practices make most renters feel like second class citizens.

August 2015.

26 Shamubeel Eaqub & Selena Eaqub, *Generation Rent*, Wellington 2015 – which is reviewed in this issue of *Counterfutures*.

The fault line among some on the Left exists, here, between those who think that homelessness and/or the struggle for state house tenants' rights are the most important issues and those who, while supporting these struggles, also dream of home ownership. There is a view in some quarters that aspiration for home ownership is just a middle class issue, not worthy of focus. Yet both groups are affected by the same crisis, and the crisis has the same causes. In my experience, home ownership has been as much a hopeful goal for low and middle income people as it has been for those who may come from a better off background. It is a pity that resentments born of different experiences and priorities can lead to division.

### *The Hikoi for Homes experience*

A short term coalition of the Child Poverty Action Group, Auckland Action Against Poverty, Unite Union and FIRST Union came together over a period of months to organise a hikoi in Auckland on 21 November 2015. Our goal was to challenge the government to prioritise decent quality, affordable and safe housing as a basic human right. To this end we held a march from Glen Innes to Okahu Bay, which took us through some of the poorest and richest suburbs of Auckland. Two smaller marches were also organised by CPAG and others in Wellington and Christchurch.

What was new and different about the Hikoi for Homes project, was that it was the first time in years (at least in Auckland) that a number of different groups had come together to take political action on housing with demands that transcended just one or two objectives and sectors.

The early organisational meetings were difficult, especially when it came to debating the exact wording of our demands. Several other groups had come to these meetings and decided not to join the coalition. Some of what I have described here as 'fractures' stemmed from the difficulties of this experience. Yet I think one of the successes of Hikoi for Homes was that, in the end, the four groups who remained agreed on seven demands. These were:

- An immediate stop to the selloff of state and council housing.
- A \$1 billion annual budget for the provision of more public and other not-for-profit housing.
- Setting minimum standards for all rented housing.
- Greater tenure protection for tenants.
- A rent freeze for five years.
- A statutory right to be housed.
- State subsidies for modest income homeownership programmes.

In the week preceding the march, and on the day itself, the Hikoi coalition received substantial mainstream media coverage. The *Herald* editorial on 21 November was headed 'Housing hikoi sign of rising social unrest'.<sup>27</sup> Hundreds of people turned out to walk the 6.5 kilometre route in conditions ranging from blazing sun to pouring rain. People from the homeless community helped carry the front banner, and folk from all walks of life joined the march. Toward the end, a contingent from AAAP and the unions split from the main march, by prearrangement, to head towards Paritai Drive, where we used music, banners and a 'homeless car' installation to highlight the contradiction between homelessness and the \$39 million mansion formerly owned by financier Mark Hotchin. The rest of the hikoi headed down to Okahu Bay for a free concert, speeches and barbecue.

The Hikoi for Homes coalition dissolved after 21 November 2015 and did not meet again, even for a debriefing session. This may have been a reflection of divisions and difficulties both in the lead up to the Auckland hikoi and on the day. From the start it was never conceived as a long haul coalition and it was only the speed of its dissolution that perhaps took some of us by surprise. The reflections which follow are in part based on my participation as an active member of the organising group for the Hikoi for Homes coalition.

<sup>27</sup> 'Editorial: Housing hikoi sign of rising social unrest', *New Zealand Herald*, 21 November 2015.

## Beyond the fragments: what else holds us back

### *Politics*

It is very much in the interests of governments that we on the Left stay divided and don't understand each other's sectors and issues. National is clever and divides their own responsibilities in a way that makes it easy for Ministers to avoid accountability. There are now three Ministers of Housing – Bill English (Housing NZ), Paula Bennett (Social Housing) and Nick Smith (Building & Housing, including the Tamaki Redevelopment Company). Anne Tolley is also involved in housing, through the Ministry of Social Development's role in state housing allocation. As well as making it easier for ministers to duck responsibility, this separation also makes it harder for groups on the ground to clearly target those responsible for what's happening.

### *Money*

One of the most difficult things about working for progressive change on housing is that what is needed above all else are a lot more healthy, decent houses, for both rent and sale, at costs which low and medium income people can genuinely afford. Houses and land cost a lot, even when building is done cheaply, and even more so in the big cities. Housing cooperatives, ecovillages and community based housing projects are great in principle but without access to capital it is seriously hard to make headway on any of these.

People need houses to live in now. Many groups like AAAP, working at the frontline of the housing crisis do not have the means to buy or lease houses for either temporary or long term use. Mostly there is nowhere we can send people. This makes us feel quite desperate. This sense of frustration and despair about lack of resources is shared by many who struggle to do their best, wherever we're placed sectorally and geographically.

### *The sheer size of the problem*

I often wonder if it is the sheer size and scale of the problem which is the biggest barrier to our getting our act together, whether in one site of struggle or across many. If the government has four ministers to deal with it, it's no wonder we find ourselves divided and stretched, with no natural organisation or space to come together, and constantly stymied by lack of resources. It is in the government's interests to keep us divided on every front. They are helped in this endeavour by the sheer scope of the issues involved.

### **What is to be done?**

As with so much else, the Left is divided by geography, ideology and organisational capacity. Fragmented groups and well-meaning individuals sometimes act as if we're in a competition to see who has the best solutions, or 'who is the best activist'. What is needed instead is a solid coherent approach.

As it stands, the government must be clapping its hands in glee at the divisions amongst us and our hopeless lack of a consistent response. The parliamentary parties of the 'Left' appear impotent. Labour lost much credibility when Twyford took his Chinese surnames initiative, and neither Labour nor the Greens are pushing the big solutions on housing which are needed in the face of the current homelessness crisis.

It can only be from a wider movement outside Parliament that change will come.

As long as we remain divided and fragmented the government can justifiably laugh its way to an even darker future on the housing front. In the absence of an effective movement or movements outside Parliament the opposition parties will continue their lacklustre approach. If we care, we must start to think together more clearly, enter deeper conversations, and start building effective organisations in the many places where none yet exist—and act. There is no space here to go into all the possible responses to the housing onslaught we're living through and which is only going to get worse.

However, some of the things we could be thinking about include:

- Doing more to understand where our different groups and sectors are coming from.
- Lifting our understanding of who holds power and how, and how we can challenge it. The power in housing comes down to politics and Parliament. That's where the laws and policies that create and maintain the current crisis originate.
- We need to hold the powerful to account. We also need to work toward a set of policies able to enact substantial change, even under capitalism – and even better, beyond it.
- Some of us need to engage with questions concerning land and capital, as building houses under peoples' collective control is always going to be part of the answer.
- Taking thoughtful, focused actions together, demonstrating resistance and offering solutions.
- Creating effective organisations at a grassroots level, which can then start to fill some of the gaps. We could, for example, increase our capacity to advocate for the rights of state and private sector tenants beyond the few effective organisations which already exist in this area.
- Strategising longer term about what a genuinely Left wing and effective housing movement might look like, and how it might be achieved.

Coalitions are difficult. The groups involved are in a constant negotiation with each other, making it hard to hold together and press forward over a sustained period, unless the coalition is doing exceptionally well. The recent anti-TPP action in Auckland on 4 February 2016 was deemed a success by many on the Left because it allowed for different levels of action from people with different priorities and perspectives. Some people marched quietly up Queen St, others took part in everything from street theatre and music through to roving blockades and fairly confrontational occupations of motorways and intersections. This acceptance of different levels of action was one of the key ingredients of the vitality and efficacy of the 1981 Springbok Tour mobilisations.

A housing movement, or united front, will not be successful until there are dedicated organisations capable of accepting a range of priorities and levels of action, and which have the ability to involve lots of different people in their work. Such movements will also need to develop real analyses and expertise to back their actions, in the way Jane Kelsey and the It's Our Future campaign have done around the TPP and HART did around apartheid South Africa.

I have spent much of my life working in organisations that have attempted to organise and mobilise unemployed people and beneficiaries. It is a very difficult task, and I see certain similarities between that work and the current problems we face in organising around housing from a radical Left base. There are a few critical reasons why building effective movements in the unemployed and housing sectors is difficult.

First, in both areas we are up against the economic and financial heart of capital. There are no quick fix solutions. Demands such as 'Government should build or acquire 10,000 state houses a year over the next three years' are as much a challenge as 'Benefits should be set at a level on which people can survive with dignity'. Such demands threaten to undermine profit taking at its core.

Second, many of the comfortably-off will not usually buy in to struggles in which the most dispossessed are engaged. There are always some who will cross class, social and race divides, but the majority of the well-off prefer to stay in spaces that feel safe for them.

Third, those most affected by the realities of unemployment, life in the benefit system, low waged precarious work and housing deprivation often find it very difficult to take a lead in struggles. They are usually too busy trying to survive from one day to the next, and their physical and mental health is often affected by the dysfunction and insecurity of relentless poverty.

To build a successful organisation in these areas means being unreasonable. You shouldn't undermine yourself before you even begin by toning down demands to what you think might be acceptable to National and Labour-led governments. The dispossessed and angry are far more likely to become involved in

organisations which prove themselves to genuinely represent their voice and interests, rather than those pandering to perceptions of what policy analysts in Wellington will deem appropriate.

Solidarity is critical. One of the things we've lost during the neoliberal capitalist onslaught has been the ability to resist in a coherent manner. Housing is symptomatic of so many things. We have a Left which struggles to unite in a meaningful and effective way around pressing poverty-related issues. This struggle is our chance to start to do something different, and better.

When political organisations and movements have the strength to make serious demands, and to collectively resist the hegemony of accepted orthodoxies and structures, then real change can begin. We on the radical Left need to find the strength, organisational skills and courage to escalate this process.

If you like what you have read, please subscribe or donate.

**G**

**COUNTERFUTURES**

---

Left thought & practice Aotearoa