




Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Tuesday, 10 July 2012

MOTION: PUBLIC HOUSING

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (6.14 pm): I rise to support the member for Bundamba's motion. About two weeks ago, at the invitation of FNQ Regional Tenant Advisory Group President, Fred Morris, I met with public housing tenants at a forum in Cairns to discuss local people's concerns over this issue. There were no surprises as to what they wanted to talk about. They were concerned about the minister's letter that was sent out and about not knowing what was going to happen to them. They were concerned about downsizing. They were concerned about having to share their homes with strangers. They were concerned about having to pay higher rent.

Although all of the state MPs from Far North Queensland were invited, I was the only local MP to attend. This was a point not missed by those who were in attendance on the day. As it happens, the Minister for Housing was in Cairns that day. He was also invited to attend the forum but he did not. Before everyone jumps up and shrieks, I am not going to demonise the minister for not fronting these tenants because I know that he has done that on other occasions. I will give him credit for doing so. But this was a missed opportunity for the minister to allay some of the fears that those people had and to put the government's position on the table to the very people who are going to be affected by those changes. I think it is a real shame that that opportunity was not taken up.

I note today's media statement by the minister and I am pleased to see that he has ruled out forced shared tenancies. He said that those who choose to stay will be subject to a 'modest increase to weekly rent'. I want to know what the minister suggests would be a 'modest increase' when we know that every dollar counts and that this is going to put a lot of pressure on plenty of families?

I wanted to pick up on a point made by the member for Sandgate earlier. She talked about a young man experiencing mental ill-health who was looking to get into housing. It is very important for all of the new members in this place to note that there was work done by the previous government and, shock horror, some of it was good work. We had a portfolio of mental health which does not exist under the new government. We went through a competitive bidding process which means that about \$52 million in federal funding is coming for new housing with a major focus on the needs of people experiencing mental ill-health. We have not heard that raised here tonight. There are plenty of things like that that the previous government did. I hope the new government picks that up and the Minister for Health and the Minister for Housing discuss how they can use that money in the most appropriate way. There is money available for building. I think it is an absolute crock to suggest that there is not that money.

A predominant view we seem to be hearing from those opposite is that most people in public housing think that it is an entitlement for life. Really all they want is a degree of certainty. What is an elderly person, perhaps a widow, who survives on the pension supposed to do? Short of winning Gold Lotto, this person will not be able to change their level of income.

Why would that person need to continually renew their lease? Why would they have to go through this process all the time? Should the emphasise not be on the fact that they know that their situation will be

the same and the onus is on them to tell the government if their situation changes? I really hope these things are taken into consideration by the minister.

Less than one-fifth of the people surveyed by the minister returned their survey. It was a good response in the time, we could say. Around a quarter of the respondents to the survey may well have said that they would pay more rent to retain an underoccupied property and almost two-thirds may well have said they support downsizing. But given that there was no option to say 'none of the above' or 'we like things just the way they are' some may have thought they did not have a choice.

It is the kind of choice between a kick in the left shin and a kick in the right shin. Both will hurt, but you would rather have neither. And in a further kick in the guts, each of the operating tenant groups in Queensland have been axed under the \$350,000 per year Tenant Participation Program. They received a letter informing them that their funding will cease on 30 June. The National Tenant Support Network says that this has effectively silenced tenant advocates at a time when tenants need the information and support of their local advocacy group more than ever. The government has given four days notice of the axing of a program that has been running for more than two decades, with, I might add—as said by the director-general of the department of housing—excellent outcomes.

The letter encourages tenant groups to continue doing their work, but without the funding support. This may mean that they cannot have a phone line or internet access. They may not be able to get the funding they need if they have to rely on other grants programs. This is not the way public housing was meant to be. It is a social responsibility of government to support those people in public housing.

We have certainly heard that the Attorney-General is prepared to mount a High Court challenge against the mining tax. That will cost about \$300,000, which is a conservative estimate. I would suggest that it is more than that. That would be the funding needed for the Tenants Participation Program.

I think the government needs to get its priorities right in terms of allocating funding. This is actually one of the very few ways that the government can control the costs of living. By not increasing rents and looking after the battlers they could actually make a real difference. Instead they are looking to focus on this being a profit-making business. Again, this is not what public housing is meant to be about. I think this government has to have a very hard look at itself and determine that this is not a new problem. It is not a problem borne by the previous government or the new one. Public housing affects all governments. They are playing politics with it and it is not the way to do it.

(Time expired)