

Housing Crisis Mustn't Be Handballed

A BILL TO ALLOW THE STATE GOVERNMENT TO ABSOLVE ITS RESPONSIBILITY ON DELIVERING THE NECESSARY SOCIAL HOUSING TASMANIA NEEDS SHOULD NOT BE PASSED, SAYS DAVID O'BYRNE.

Once again, the State Government is failing to come to grips with the truly awful housing crisis facing Tasmania. The Liberals' latest plan to create a social housing statutory body will not improve waiting lists or accelerate the supply of new public and affordable housing stock, but it will do an excellent job of absolving Liberal Ministers from their responsibilities.

The State Government's new Homes Tasmania bill was tabled in Parliament last week, on Tuesday and then brought on for debate barely 48 hours later, and it foreshadows the biggest shift in the management of the State's social housing sector since WW2. Rather than being a core part of the Tasmanian public service and a direct Ministerial responsibility, social and public housing will become the responsibility of an arms-length statutory body, Homes Tasmania.

To some, this may seem like a bureaucratic restructure without much consequence. To others, who have been listening to the government's vast amount of spin recently, it may seem as though this new housing authority will be a panacea for the state's worsening housing crisis.

In political, business and community life, when we make decisions to take on important jobs or roles we are all driven by the desire to be a part of making something better, to take direct responsibility for either improving something or actually fixing it. In sporting terms, it is the moment when the team captain says, in a tight finish, "Give me the ball – I've got this."

Make no mistake, this is the moment when Housing Minister, Guy Barnett has given up and basically washed his hands of the entrenched housing problem. It's the opposite of the "Give me the ball" approach, a moment when team captain Guy Barnett says "Coach, put me on the bench".

The Housing Minister will no longer have direct responsibility for the delivery and administration of the Liberals' target of 10,000 new affordable and social houses by 2032. He will no longer have to explain why the Liberal Government has only built an average of 180 social houses per year – less than a quarter of what it promised. He will no longer have to explain how, as Housing Minister, he will now deliver the 900 houses required every year between now and 2032. And he won't be directly accountable for the inevitable failure to meet the 10,000 target, and the continuing failure to reduce social housing waiting lists.

This 'hands-off' approach to managing Tasmania's social housing will not work. The shortage of affordable rental and purchased housing stock is partly a product of market failure in some segments of the housing market. This is a world-wide phenomenon (which takes a particularly acute form in Tasmania) and there is growing recognition that governments need to assume greater responsibility, rather than hand it over to third parties.

Social housing should continue to be managed directly by government. There are over 4,400 families languishing on the social housing waitlist, many of whom are currently living in a car or in a tent in the middle of winter. Tasmanian rental vacancy rates are the lowest in the country and weekly rents are amongst the highest. Affordable and accessible rental housing is indisputably one of the biggest issues facing Tasmanians right now and should be an absolute priority of the Liberal Government.

And yet, in the face of the sheer scale and impact of this housing crisis, the State Government has chosen to reduce its role. Homes Tasmania will be managed by an independent board at arms-length

from Government. Not only does this absolve the government of its fundamental responsibility to ensure some of the most vulnerable Tasmanians have a safe place to sleep at night, it also hands control and decision-making of the social housing sector to Homes Tasmania - diminishing public scrutiny and ultimately accountability.

In essence, it pushes the housing crisis - and the responsibility for fixing it - away from government.

Homes Tasmania is a flawed model that ignores partial market failure in the housing sector. Its statutory brief has an excessive and misplaced focus on private sector delivery of social housing underpinned by State investment and subsidies – continuing with policies that have delivered partial market failure (but without accountability).

A better model is a direct Government agency (akin to Tasmania's previous Housing Commission) with a commitment to rebuilding affordable public housing stock. Homes Tasmania will not be able to leverage the capability and expertise of the public service in the same way that a government agency can.

Social housing is a complicated policy area with many links to other aspects of government policies including health, disability and corrections. Homes Tasmania has a limited brief which means it will consider social housing in isolation – with no direct integration into other areas of government policy, and no clear line of sight on the many social factors that contribute to the housing crisis.

Instead of dissolving the Department of Communities and fragmenting key government services across multiple departments, and handing social housing responsibility to an arms-length authority, the Liberal Government should step up and do its job. It should abandon this poorly thought out attempt to avoid responsibility. Because the 4,300 Tasmanians languishing on the social housing wait list deserve nothing less.

No doubt the Government will use its numbers in the lower house to push the bill through so I urge the Members of the Legislative Council to reject this bill.