

Minto: a case study in the destruction of public housing in Australia

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A visit to Minto, the site of one of 110 Department of Housing estates in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, highlighted the rapidity with which public housing is being dismantled across the country. Entire swathes of the suburb are being torn down or left to rot, and residents are being stampeded or coerced into quitting their homes. The state Labor government is steadily demolishing 800 dwellings, affecting 4,000 residents.

Estates such as Minto have clusters of 1,000 to 4,000 houses, townhouses and units, representing more than one-third of the state's public housing stock. Currently, 49 estates—almost half of the state's total—have been earmarked for complete or partial levelling. Similar plans are underway in other Australian states.

Like other estates around Sydney, Minto is located on the city's western and south-western outer fringes, far removed from the wealth and ambience of the harbourside and beach neighbourhoods. It was constructed in the 1970s under a program of slum clearance, in which working class families were shifted from the inner-city to disused farming land.

There, it was expected that workers would find employment in hoped-for nearby industries. However, by the end of the 1970s the post-war boom had collapsed and the prospects of employment turned into a mirage. While at the end of the 1960s, 80 percent of public housing tenants were in paid employment, today more than 90 percent depend on government benefits. Public housing has been transformed into an ever-diminishing refuge of last resort.

Betsy and Derek Coulter, residents of Dunlop Way, which is targeted for destruction, told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were among Minto's first tenants and had lived in their house for 27 years. When they moved out from inner Sydney, there was no shopping centre and no high school. Travelling to Sydney by public transport took nearly two hours, in trains that were like "cattle trucks".

Well before being earmarked for demolition, estates like Minto were left to decay. The Coulters pointed to homes in a dangerous state of disrepair, with termite infestation, rising damp and asbestos hazards commonplace. One of their neighbours, Lise, who is living in a house with eight other people, including four children, said the damp carpet had exacerbated her sons' asthma.

Next door, Peter, an epileptic, said that although he had notified the housing department that on medical advice he should not be living in a two-storey dwelling, he had been offered no alternative housing. Stephen and his son, Phillip, also residents of Dunlop Way, complained that the sewerage pipe was connected to the sink in their dwelling. The illegal plumbing had been reported to officials but no action had been taken.

Allocated shoddily constructed public housing a generation ago, the situation for some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society has deteriorated badly over the past two decades. In a profile of tenants living in public housing estates, Shelter NSW lists low incomes, high levels of unemployment, high levels of welfare dependency, poor educational attainment and poor health. Residents are also likely to be single parents with limited mobility.

According to official statistics, only 35 percent of public housing properties are adequately maintained. Declining rent revenues, because of the falling number of employed tenants, combined with severe cuts in state and federal funding, have resulted in a statewide maintenance shortfall of around \$650 million.

Having created a disaster for public housing residents, the state government is utilising the crisis to replace public housing with private accommodation, a process that is well advanced (See "Australia: public housing being 'cannibalised'").

Residents of Valley Vista, the first precinct selected for bulldozing under the government's plan, were informed just one day before former Housing Minister Andrew Refshauge announced the "redevelopment" of Minto in May, 2002. Two months later, the demolition of the first six houses had begun.

In March, about 300 Minto tenants attended a forum, "More Than Bricks and Mortar," to voice their opposition to the government's demolition plans and lack of consultation.

Among those at the forum was Colleen Fuller, a former resident confined to a wheelchair, who travelled from her new home in Woy Woy, on the state's central coast, 100 kilometres away, to attend the forum. She told the media that the stress and uncertainty nearly split up her family.

Other residents complained that they were not given enough notice of actual removal, some only finding out a day or two in

advance that they were to pack and vacate dwellings, which in some cases had been their homes for over 20 years.

In the same month, the Minto Residents Action Group (MRAG), in partnership with an academic, Dr Judy Stubbs, and welfare groups, published a study concerned with the human and economic impact of Minto's "redevelopment". *Leaving Minto: A Study of the Social and Economic Impacts of Public Housing Estate Redevelopment* detailed how residents had been kept in the dark.

The unveiling of the demolition plans was designed to sound a death knell for the area. As the study reports, there was a sense of instability as soon as the project was announced. Residents commented: "All of the rumours flying around Minto are creating a sense of uncertainty ... this needs to be stopped immediately or anarchy sets in."

At the same time, life for those still living among the demolished areas was described as like "living in a war zone," making a mockery of the government's claim that no one has been forced to move.

Margaret, one of the residents who opposed the government's demolition plan, reflected on her two-year fight with the government. "We've been treated like cattle—shipped onto trucks and shipped out. Their real agenda was always to get rid of us."

While government officials now claim that their failure to consult with Minto residents was a mistake, their actions are bound up with the agenda the government is carrying out: the phasing out of public housing. The secrecy and speed of its operations are calculated to present residents with a fait accompli, and minimise the likelihood of residents organising any opposition.

Residents were promised that they would "benefit by having better access to alternative social housing". But the study, which surveyed relocated residents of the Valley Vista precinct, found "the negatives of the new home often outweighed the positives". Many residents faced increased rents and other substantial costs such as "having to purchase new fittings and fixtures". Others found that they had been re-located to older houses, requiring more maintenance than their previous homes in Minto.

Communities were deliberately broken up and residents dispersed across the state. As one resident commented in *Leaving Minto*: "We are more than neighbours. We consider ourselves family. We share a real history....We really rely on one another. When we think about moving we get teary-eyed and two of us for the first time in our lives are on anti-depressants. It takes years to build such trust and connections, and we feel we will be dead before we could establish anywhere new..."

Leaving Minto also documented residents' concerns with the government's underlying privatisation agenda. In a letter sent to the housing department in 2002, MRAG asked 13 questions, the first of which was, "What percentage of the redevelopment

will be public housing?"

On its Minto Renewal Project web site, the government portrays the redevelopment of Minto in terms of progressive social objectives. It promises to "deliver a vibrant new community with a mix of public, affordable and private accommodation set within a modern-day urban landscape, ensuring an improved living environment for current and future residents."

According to the web site, 30 percent of replacement housing in Minto will be public, with the remainder to be sold off as private housing. But MRAG chairperson Adele Goodwin told us that even this proportion was not guaranteed and was only extracted from department officials under pressure from residents.

The *Leaving Minto* study notes that officials have usually answered residents' repeated questions about the planned low levels of public housing by referring to the need to reduce social problems in the area. However, the report cites a blunter, "more financially oriented response" offered by local Labor member of parliament Graham West at a residents' briefing. He indicated that the ratio of private to public housing would be determined by what the private developers and the housing department would "find profitable".

As these remarks indicate, developers hope to profit handsomely by acquiring select segments of the suburb. In an adjoining area, Macquarie Links, for example, a private gated estate has been built around a golf course.

In her study of public housing demolition projects in NSW and two other Australian states, academic Kathy Arthurson concludes: "The focus of much estate regeneration is demolition and sales on the private market, without replacement public housing and the future trends suggest even lower levels of new building or purchase." Arthurson's case studies show reductions in the amount of public housing of "up to two-thirds".

In the case of Villawood East, a public housing estate in Sydney's south-west that was torn down in 1998, not one of the 253 dwellings was replaced by public accommodation, despite government assurances to the contrary.

Clearly public housing tenants are among the most disadvantaged layers in society. A generation ago, the Labor Party paid lip service to their accommodation needs. Today, however, the provision of housing, like health and education is determined increasingly by what the market "finds profitable".

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