

THE CHC AND NATIONAL HOUSING POLICY

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Abstract

Although the 1944 report of the Commonwealth Housing Commission (CHC) earned the admiration of historians and political philosophers, of practical housing administrators and of urban academics and planners it cannot be described as a 'seminal document'.

Most of its 95 recommendations were either rejected or never implemented.

The report, nonetheless, was important because it was the foundation of the Commonwealth's 1945 initiative in framing the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA), the first of nine Agreements with the States under which public housing was initially built, largely for rental accommodation for low income households. The CHC was also important because it was indirectly influential in the creation of State planning authorities.

This paper revisits the work of the CHC and the connection between the provision of housing and good urban planning that it identified. Such a visit is relevant in current discussions of housing and planning issues.

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INTRODUCTION

The demise of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) and the ‘destruction’/failure of public housing has led to the current crisis in the supply of rental accommodation for low income households. Urban planning has also come under increasing attack. Current initiatives of the Commonwealth are designed to address some of the same housing and urban planning issues explored by the Commonwealth Housing Commission (CHC of 1943/44 but with seemingly little recognition of that history and how it shaped the CSHA .

This essay explores the Commonwealth’s initiatives in housing and urban policy in the mid 1940s and offers some comment on their relevance for consideration of current housing policy, it falls broadly into three parts:

1. BEFORE THE CHC

With the virtual absence of any tradition of public housing in colonial Australia, it is unsurprising that housing was not an issue in the deliberations over the Constitution, or that it was not included in the list of Commonwealth powers in section 51.

The era of public housing in Australia began formally with a Parliamentary motion by the Queensland Treasurer, A.G.C. Hawthorne, in 1910:

‘That it is desirable that a Bill be introduced to enable the Government to assist persons in receipt of small incomes to provide homes for themselves.’(Queensland Hansard 1909:55)

This initiative into public housing was followed by the other States over the next ten years: South Australia later in 1910, Western Australia and New South Wales in 1912, Victoria in 1914, and Tasmania in 1919.

Commonwealth responsibilities

Commonwealth Governments were never enthusiastic about involvement in housing even where there were strong welfare reasons for participation. They did, however, undertake two areas of specialist housing activity. In 1919 the Commonwealth initiated the War Service Homes Act to provide dwellings for Australian soldiers or their widows and dependents. The Commonwealth also accepted a major housing function with the development of Canberra.

The sole venture of the Commonwealth into public housing in the States was the Commonwealth Housing Act in 1928 which empowered the Commonwealth Savings Bank to advance funds to approved housing authorities, including banks, for the buying and building of houses, and the discharge of mortgages. The scheme was an extension of and supplement to the various programs of advances introduced by State governments and was directed at the salaried person who wanted to get ahead but was stifled by lack of access to funds. There was a deep suspicion among Labor Parliamentarians that the housing bill was an administrative fiddle designed to conceal the undermining of a Labor icon – the Commonwealth Bank (CPD 1927:383). Whatever its sponsors motivations,

the 1928 Act was unsuccessful . The Joint Committee on Social Security summarised its achievement in 1942:

‘Comparatively little activity has, up to the present, resulted from the passing of this Act... It would appear that with the onset of the depression in 1929-30 the operation of the Act was largely suspended, and no action has since been taken to exercise the borrowing which was conferred by the Act, or to advance moneys to the Savings Banks for the purposes specified. Such action would enable the Act to operate in full at any time.’(JPCSS 1942:27).

The United Australia Party (UAP)-Country Party Coalition which dominated federal politics during the 1930’s had little interest in housing. Prime Minister, J.A. Lyons, a former Labor Premier of Tasmania and Treasurer in the Scullin Labor Government of the early depression years was an exception. In the 1934 election campaign, he promised to introduce a national housing scheme with the Commonwealth providing low cost housing in association with State and Local Government and to clear the city of slums. Despite Lyons’ efforts there was little political incentive for the Federal Government to embark on a new housing scheme.

The Federal Labor Party also showed little interest in housing, either as an embattled federal government from 1929 to 1932 or as a slowly revitalising opposition through the depressed 1930’s. Meeting the housing demands of the Depression was left to the States, which were goaded by strong social reform and slum clearance movements.

The most elaborate venture into depression housing was the Housing Unemployed Trust created by the NSW Government, which built some dwellings and provided materials for provision of a sort of shelter, with the person assisted usually providing some land. Other

states introduced similar measures designed to provide shelter and jobs for the unemployed but these constituted the palest of palliatives. Of greater significance was the introduction of the first major rental housing scheme with the 1936 creation of the South Australian Housing Trust (SAHT) whose work deeply influenced the report on housing by the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security and the subsequent investigations of the CHC (CHC 1944,175)(Marsden 1986).

During the late depression years slum clearance and rehousing the displaced population. was an important part of planning ideology, which in its most extensive form linked physical planning and high aesthetic standards for new urban development to broader social and economic planning and designed to establish a more equitable distribution of wealth. This planning ideology stressing physical determinism and paternal, elitist values often of the narrowest kind began increasingly to influence Australian governments.

Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security

The extensive literature on 'slum clearance' and the investigations and demonstration clearances undertaken in the late 1930's were important influences on the researches and reports of the CHC. An even more potent influence on the analysis of housing policy was the work of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security appointed on 3 July 1941. The first of its seven reports recommended that a Housing Plan Authority should be established to investigate the Australian housing situation and report to the Minister for Social Security, on means of:

- (1) Improving the standard and increasing the quantity of economic and healthy housing available to the Australian people;
- (2) Abolishing existing slum conditions in urban and rural areas.

The report stated that housing, in particular rental housing for low income earners, and the related problems of slum clearance and re-housing, should be treated as social welfare matters. This argument was amplified in the fourth report, which was devoted to housing and was the first major outline of housing policy compiled by a national government in Australia. The Committee recommended that the Commonwealth Government should set about the immense task of planning and research immediately:

‘The magnitude of the task is such as would require for its successful execution resources which only the nation has at its disposal.’(JPCSS 1942:4)

The report of the Joint Committee on Social Security looked ahead to the work of the CHC. It stated themes which the later and much more comprehensive report would elaborate. Both reports saw housing as crucial to post-war reconstruction and economic development, the Joint Committee stressed its importance as a necessary social service, while the CHC conceived it largely in the functional terms of planning and construction.

2. THE CHC

The Department of Post-War Reconstruction, established in 1943, was seen as an instrument of social change and set about creating three Commissions of Enquiry – the Rural Reconstruction Commission, the Housing Commission (CHC) and the Secondary Industries Commission. From the outset the DPWRC had seen its role as specially concerned with the physical aspects of planning and development (Coombs 1983).

The CHC was directed to inquire into and report upon the present housing position and the housing requirements of Australia during the post-war period. It was to prove a major inquiry. The inquiry heard 948 witnesses and visited 53 towns in every State. The CHC presented

interim reports on 21 October 1943 and 31 March 1944 and a final report on 25 August 1944.

The CHC's modus operandi was conventional, first assembling written submissions and responses to questionnaires, followed by examination of witnesses and field investigations in each state. The most intensive examination was directed at senior officers of the various State housing organisations, executives of relevant State Departments and Authorities, and local government representatives and executives of the main private sector associations. The CHC singled out submissions which had impressed it, for example, that of the Modern Architectural Research Society of Perth which provided a substantial input into the planning sections of the final report.

CHC Final Report

It is difficult to adequately summarise what is one of the major documents of Australian public policy but the major points are outlined here. The report was 154 pages long with 173 pages of appendices and included 95 major recommendations. The issues covered were discussed in seventeen parts. The complex and often convoluted organisation of its material makes the report difficult to review. Individual passages and sections are written clearly, often stylishly, but the idiosyncratic presentation creates problems for the reader. The report seems a remarkable melange of naivety, sophistication, idealism, practical wisdom and technical detail. It is stimulating, even inspiring, in its range of ideas, ideals and aspirations, and at the same time is dispiriting in its occasional crudity, ambiguity and internal contradiction. It is a curious mixture of clear sightedness and myopia, encompassing without any recognition of contradiction, concepts which are patently ambivalent, while offering a host of insights into a crucial area of national policy.

In its letter of presentation the CHC spelt out its philosophical basis:

‘We consider that a dwelling of good standard and equipment is not only the need but the right of every citizen – whether the dwelling is to be rented or purchased, no tenant or purchaser should be exploited by excessive profit.’ (emphasis in original)
(CHC 1944:8)

The single most striking feature of the report is the comprehensive definition of housing it employed:

‘A term used to cover construction of dwellings and amenities, town planning, domestic equipment and all subjects related to dwellings and their planning.’ (CHC 1944:9)

Such a mixture of precision and vagueness brought virtually every aspect of national planning remotely related to home construction within the ambit of the Commission.

An historical survey of 150 years of Australian housing, together with a description of the present position, was covered in less than nine pages. Although it acknowledges the paucity of data and contained a plea for a national survey of housing, the report did nothing to remedy the dearth of information and did little more than assert the magnitude of the housing problem and assume that the need for action was self evident. The report drew heavily for support on the crusading tracts of the 1930’s and early 1940’s for its empirical evidence. The CHC did not make any significant attempt to draw together and analyse the range of statistical and other material it obtained from State authorities which went to considerable pains to co-operate and supply the information sought by the CHC. As a result, there is a considerable amount of data in the evidence put before the CHC which finds no correlative in the final report.

In addressing the second term of reference, ‘the housing requirements of Australia during the post-war period’, the report spent little time in trying to estimate the likely demand for housing and its components and offered little in the way of empirical material or even reasoned argument in support of its case. Given the sorry history of Lyons’ 1934 election promise it is surprising that the report gave little weight to the constitutional validity of Commonwealth Government activity in housing. One of the outstanding ambiguities of the report is revealed by the inclusion in the report of a Model Housing Act (appendix VI) with most sections taken from State legislation. The assumption seems to have been that because one or other of the States already had many of the powers referred to, there would be little opposition to their extension.

The argument in favour of government housing activity was breathtaking in its brevity, simplicity of argument and strength of assertion. The report was imbued with an overwhelmingly federalist philosophy. At times it was strongly decentralist, at times centralist and yet there is little recognition of the basic changes in Commonwealth-State relations which acceptance of its recommendations would have brought or of the continued Commonwealth control of income tax after the war was over. Nor was there any hint that the Commonwealth’s powers in relation to housing might be reinterpreted in the way they were 30 years later.

Part V, the second longest part of the report, dealt with national regional and town planning. Together with appendix XX on “planning principles – solar planning” it became the major teaching text in training a generation of Town Planners. It assumed a degree of community spirit and rational public decision making in a context of cooperative federalism which, given the temper of the times, was excessively optimistic.

Here the report purports to make a case for national, regional and town planning, observing that:

‘... housing is essentially an expression of the way of life of the people, and that, therefore, it is impossible to separate housing from a consideration of the broader aspects of the life of the people – from such questions, as how and where they earn their living, and how and where they spend their leisure.’(CHC 1944:27)

This bland assertion aside, it fails to make the case. Citizen participation was clearly just as desirable to the reformers of the mid 1940’s as it is today, but the report gave little guidance on how it could be achieved nor, given the nature of the proposed planning system, how the citizens were to be involved in planning their environment.

The proposed planning machinery envisaged a three tier system – Commonwealth, State and Local. Apart from indicating what powers each level should have there was little discussion of the way in which they would relate to one another. The report stressed the need for coordination in planning at and between each tier in the system but there was no indication of how this might be achieved. As an interim measure, until the appropriate planning legislation was enacted, the planning control measures proposed in the Model Housing Act to declare ‘housing development areas’ would be appropriate. This was one of the few places in the report where implementation problems were recognised.

The preoccupation with slum clearance was revealed in a longish discussion of ‘density’, in a section on the ‘replanning (of) existing towns’ and in the devotion of a major section of the report (Part XV) solely to that topic. Some of the problems which slum clearance programs might cause were identified. Given the commitment early in the report to

citizen participation, there was not the slightest recognition of the possible community resistance which attempts at slum clearance might arouse.

Following a discussion of planning under the heading of “Land for Residential Purposes” (Part VI) the report pointed to the problems resulting from high land prices. It also argued in favour of the nationalisation of land, the institution of leasehold tenure and the introduction of a betterment or increment tax.

Part VII dealt with “Projected Housing Programmes” covering the present, the immediate post-war period and the situation in the long term. The CHC anticipated problems with the supply of both men and materials and suggested appropriate targets. It proposed that the immediate relief program should emphasize building of dwellings for rental but that in the immediate post-war period the government should aim to sponsor half the annual construction, only half of which should be for rental. It is too much to assert that the CHC saw the other 75 per cent as for owner occupation but the CHC seems to have anticipated a much higher level of home ownership than existed at the time. The report referred to the need for a range of dwelling sizes, a mixture of single, attached and multi-storey units and the priority to be given to rural housing. It recognised the need to use sites in existing subdivisions conveying the impression of practicality and flexibility.

The longest part of the report dealt with Administration of Housing (Part VIII). Here, the report considered a bewildering array of issues: how a Commonwealth Housing Authority might relate to State housing authorities through State planning authorities and a Commonwealth Planning Authority; rental subsidies; how dwellings should be allocated and many others. Emphasis was given to the need for ‘coordination’ but there was little indication of how this might be achieved. The proposal for a massive

bureaucratic structure (appendix IX) did not sit well with notions of citizen participation or of the development of regional administration.

In Part VII, the report presented options on how housing for ex-servicemen under the War Service Homes Act should be administered. It also suggested that such housing, whether for rental or purchase, should be interspersed with homes for the general community to avoid the creation of sectional groups.

Consistent with its views on decentralisation and citizen participation, the report proposed that local government authorities should be involved in the development of housing, and given increased power to do this. It also argued for the fostering of community associations encouraged to take responsibility for certain community facilities, and the maintenance and administration of each housing estate. The remaining proposals in this section (Part VIII) were a grab-bag of miscellaneous provisions.

The report presented an argument for various forms of subsidy, including some discussion of the maximum proportion of a family's income which should be allocated to housing by both renters and purchasers.

The report did not comment on the finance for the housing program it recommended.

Although it pointed out that financial assistance was to be provided on the condition that the States met certain conditions:

- 1 satisfactory provisions to be made for town planning, including community facilities,
- 2 setting up of State Housing Authorities with specified powers,
- 3 building to the standard approved by the Commonwealth Housing Authority,

- 4 costs not to exceed the unit cost approved by the Commonwealth Housing Authority,
- 5 government –financed dwelling units to be allotted in accordance with an agreed system of priorities,
- 6 assistance to home purchasers and renters to be granted in accordance with an agreed method,
- 7 various administrative recommendations including the power of the Commonwealth to check State projects and audit their accounts.

The CHC pointed out, that as several States already contemplated most of the measures recommended as conditions of financial assistance, little further action would be necessary.

The organisation of the domestic building industry worried the Commission (Part IX) and it identified areas of investigation for greater efficiency. Part XII and Appendix X dealt with housing standards in what is arguably the more influential discussion in the report. The recommendation had an intuitive appeal but was inconsistent with the suggestions about decentralisation and local action.

One of the more utopian notions which preoccupied the Commission was community facilities. Part XVI lists the facilities and services thought to be appropriate and which the Commission recommended should be built at the same time as the dwellings.

The penultimate part of the report (XVII) dealt with a miscellany of subsidiary questions.

The Commission was strongly oriented to concepts of public housing reflecting the needs of lower income workers. It assumed that the private sector could look after itself in post-

war capital markets, and accordingly there was no need for it to make recommendations on how this traditional market should operate.

The report gave tacit support for the nationalisation of land and concluded that despite the problems associated with land nationalisation, it should be seriously considered. In other respects it was not a particularly radical document.

The CHC was highly bureaucratic in the elaborate structure it recommended for implementation of its national plan. A major impression the report creates is that the Commonwealth's role was to focus on supplying the finance and coordinating the construction and planning activity of State and local government. The Commission envisaged that the States would be the major constructing authority (although at least three-quarters of the construction would be in the private sector), with local government undertaking subsidiary construction and having a more direct administrative role. The "Plan for Housing the People" was based on the creation of interlocking construction and planning hierarchies, weaving the three strands of Government into an elaborate federal fabric.

Finally, the CHC set out the elements of a national policy for urban and regional development even though it did not draw the strands together in a formal statement.

The Housing Ministry

During the war it had been necessary to find emergency accommodation for the new war industries, principally munitions, often located away from traditional industrial areas.

This work had been done initially by a War Housing Trust and subsequently re-organised into a War Housing Division within the Department of Labor and National Service. In July 1945 this division became the Directorate of Housing and was transferred to a newly

created Department of Works and Housing, the first time that the housing function had been given departmental status in the administrative history of the Commonwealth although the 'Works' component of the Department was the more significant.

Shortly after the Second World War broke out the Commonwealth and states agreed that rent controls should be introduced for its duration. Rent controls continued long after the peace and were justified on the grounds that the effects of the Great Depression, the cessation of house construction during the war and the explosion in demand after the war placed workers in intolerable circumstances.

3. THE CSHA AND IMPLEMENTATION

The CHC remained in existence for almost a year after its report was presented disbanding on the eve of the introduction of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) legislation in September 1945. The negotiations with the States on a national housing scheme were based upon the CHC recommendations, and the Commission assisted with the presentation of the Commonwealth case, although the principal Commonwealth participants were the Regional Planning Division of the DPWR and the Directorate of Housing. Dedman, as PWR Minister, introduced the CSHA legislation to the Parliament and not the recently appointed Minister for Works and Housing. Thereafter, Commonwealth responsibility for housing policy moved largely to Works and Housing.

There was considerable pressure on the Government over housing deficiencies during the period between CHC report, and the introduction of the CSHA legislation. One source of pressure was political as the Opposition parties pressed the Government to produce housing policies. Dedman was at pains to stress in the Parliament that the States were

responsible for housing, and that Constitutional limitations meant too much should not be expected from the Commonwealth. This cautious approach was designed to dampen expectations, as the lack of enthusiasm by the States for a comprehensive national housing plan became clear. Despite Opposition gibes about the Government producing “planners galore but no houses”, the Government did not divulge the contents of the CHC report until the legislation was before the Parliament. This circumspection limited political outcry over the more controversial aspects of the report, and when the CSHA legislation was debated in Parliament, only passing reference was made to it.

Another source of pressure on the Government was the pent up demand for new housing deriving from the cessation of normal building activity during the war and the backlog which had developed during the 1920's and the 1930's. This demand came mostly from more affluent home seekers whose aspirations had been repressed by war and whose impatience made it highly unlikely that they would be satisfied by the CHC's priorities.

Architects and builders offered a staggering range of designs to a public starved by wartime shortages and the deterioration of property from lack of repairs. Some of the designs offered were relatively modest and within the price range of middle income earners although most were directed to the affluent. The certainty of a vigorous private market whose ample demand was geared to individual rather than community preferences and satisfactions pointed to problems of coordination between public and private sectors in implementing national planning and housing programs.

During the negotiations with the States, the Federal Government suggested a safety valve for pressures on resources by offering to retain its wartime powers over construction by a permit system, but this was rejected. This indicated the problems faced by the Federal Government in negotiating an agreement for post-war housing in the face of State

restiveness and public frustration at the prospect of continued wartime regulation. These problems were intensified by the unfavourable climate for Commonwealth action that followed the defeat of the 14 powers referendum in 1944. With no expansion of constitutional powers, State governments anxious to assert their autonomy and with the certainty of a buoyant private market, the Commonwealth was not in a position to enforce a substantial compliance with proposals based on the CHC recommendations.

The result was a compromise, as the disappointed Dedman made clear when outlining the CSHA to the Parliament:

‘This agreement is a compromise. It is the best that we have been able to get in agreement, and I will not pretend that in all matters it satisfies the Commonwealth.’

(CPD 1945:5385)

He acknowledged that the Bill did not provide a national housing policy because it covered only the supply of housing at a decent standard for those who needed accommodation, and who could not or would not buy a house. Dedman was at pains to stress what the Commonwealth could not do. It could not control, in peacetime, the production, allocation and distribution of materials. But it did maintain rationing. It had no power to decide priorities in the allocation of housing, and therefore it could not ensure that those in greatest need should be the first to be housed. It could not enforce the correct placing of houses within towns, nor of towns within the Commonwealth, because of its lack of control over regional and town planning. Apart from control over funding all that the Commonwealth could do was cajole and encourage, set down principles, and conduct research. This it proposed to do.

Although Dedman made the standard genuflection to slum clearance, he was more realistic, even humane in his approach than the voluble social reformers of the 1930's. Priority would be given to those living in bad housing conditions, but there would be no massive clearance and rebuilding on the lines advocated by the CHC. Lack of Commonwealth support for massive clearance in the early post-war years was a principal reason for the survival of much sound inner urban housing stock.

In broad terms, the Agreement enshrined one of the major proposals of the CHC: the implementation of a rental housing program funded by the Commonwealth and constructed and administered by the States. This rental housing plan was seen as the linchpin of the CHC recommendations, and it was a significant achievement that Commonwealth and States had reached a workable arrangement to implement it. In the process of bargaining and compromise, the integrated structure of housing, land use planning and community development advocated by the CHC was lost.

The initial reaction of the Parliamentary Opposition to the CSHA was almost apathetic. There was little political point in assailing a national housing project at a time of demonstrable need, but the Opposition did not try to exploit the controversial aspects of the CHC report, particularly nationalisation of land. The CSHA would have cleared the Parliament with largely bipartisan agreement but for one extraordinary political misjudgement.

Neither side of politics had established a monopoly on unequivocal support for home ownership. Some non-Labor politicians had supported the interests of landlord investment in rental housing and had shown a tendency to sneer at the home owning pretensions of lower income earners. Some Labor politicians had asserted the interests of tenants exploited by the private rental market, and advocated greater home ownership as

a remedy. These were not clearly drawn ideological positions but the CSHA debate was to produce a marked hardening of partisan battle lines on the issue of home ownership when, in replying to points made during the debate, Dedman said:

‘The Commonwealth Government is concerned to provide adequate and good housing for the workers; it is not concerned with making the workers into little capitalists.’ CPD 1945:6265)

Although the Government was able to use its Parliamentary majority to defeat the writing of home ownership into the legislation the dimensions of the housing debate were changed utterly by Dedman.

With the passage of the CSHA legislation and a commencement of low income home rental programs by State government, the role of the DPWR in housing policy receded. Responsibility for housing policy was transferred to the Department of Works and Housing, a department with a strong construction function. In the process housing shed much of the passionate advocacy that the CHC and DPWR had given it. The removal of housing policy from strong philosophical and welfare influences was partly a reflection of the CHC report which had tempered its philosophical and welfare preoccupations with a strong functional and construction bias. At the same time, the report placed these aspects of housing policy firmly in a broad context of community development and other welfare related issues. The change of administrative responsibility had important consequences, with the functional and construction side of housing policy dominating philosophical and welfare issues in the early implementation of the CSHA.

The gradual transformations of the 1945 CSHA which shifted the focus over the subsequent 8 Agreements from the provision of public housing through welfare housing

to residual social housing not only recognised the primacy of owner occupation they served also to create and entrench the problems of alienation and concentrations of social disadvantage the CHC had sought to change and to weaken urban planning in the states.

CONCLUSION

The negotiation of the initial CSHA based on the CHC was a substantial achievement. In an era when there was little tradition of cooperative federalism the Commonwealth succeeded in establishing machinery for national government housing policy that dictated the distribution of Federal assistance for the next fifty years. Although the ambitions of the CHC were not fully realised the CSHA was a successful vehicle in Australian federalism for the transmission of Federal funds to implement specific national programs. It was a major capital works program shaping Australian cities and an important influence on macro-economic policy. The current replacement of the CSHA by a series of specific purpose welfare accommodation programs that have not had the benefit of a coherent analysis of the housing needs of urban populations such as that provided by the CHC and the weakening of the link between housing and urban development may serve to re-create the social conditions the CHC sought to ameliorate.

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