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Equity Institute



HOUSING, ACTIVISM AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT: THE BENDIGO STREET OCCUPATION – A CASE STUDY

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Bendigo Street, Collingwood, the street at the centre of this research, is on the lands of Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, and work for this report was undertaken on both Wurundjeri and Wathaurong lands. The research team acknowledges that sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne (HREC 1853213.1).

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1. SUMMARY

WHY DO THIS RESEARCH?

The Bendigo Street Occupation that occurred between March and November 2016 is a rare Australian example of housing activism in terms of its impact and scale. The occupation involved people occupying houses owned by the government in Collingwood, Melbourne. The houses had been left vacant for years after the tunnel project they had been compulsorily acquired for had been cancelled.

The occupation occurred amid a housing crisis and drew attention to the housing justice issues and social, cultural, legal and policy challenges that informed them. This led the researchers to ask whether there were lessons to be learned from the Bendigo Street Occupation for future housing activism and policy.

Drawing on Mike's background as a social policy officer with Merri-bek City Council and Kelly's housing activism work with the Homeless Persons Union Victoria (HPUV), this research report makes practical policy and process recommendations to inform institutional responses to housing justice issues. It particularly focusses on local government, the arm of government most closely connected to, and therefore able to best support, the community.

METHOD

As participant researchers with complementary lived activist and organisational experience of the Bendigo Street Occupation, we conducted extensive desktop research into the occupation, drawing on material that included council minutes and email correspondence to establish a sequence of events. We conducted in-depth interviews with four activists and four people from local government about how they understood the nature and progression of the Bendigo Street Occupation, and what they learned from it. The interview material was then coded and themed.

FINDINGS

The activists had been unaware that the houses they were occupying had been the subject of advocacy by the local council (Yarra) for retention as social housing. This situation resulted in a curious relationship developing between activists and council. The council had been advocating for two years for the Bendigo Street house owners, the state government, to allow the council to turn the houses into social housing. Once activists occupied the housing, the council ceased its advocacy. This appears to be because both the senior management and elected councillors saw more risk than benefit in explicitly siding with the activists against the state government. (The council did not voice support for the occupation but provided support indirectly in meaningful practical measures.) The activists then felt isolated, and the local government people were distanced from what was happening. Most of the activists interviewed for this research felt the action was important and a success, but they differed on what constituted the success, and how significant it was.

The consensus from the interviewees was that activism should be seen as part of the change process that occurs at the local level. Where a local government's aims and values coincide with those of activists, local councils can use their resources to act and do things to support the activists. Activists can also be more successful if they have a better understanding of local government decision-making structures. For example, understanding that support from individual council officers tends to be less effective than that of elected officials as the latter hold the decision-making power.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make housing the business of local government, which has local knowledge and direct, practical community connection.
- Councils should develop policy frameworks to appropriately engage with campaigns and actions.
- Councils' in-house communication teams could provide support and expertise to help counter powerful opposition agendas and narratives.
- Councils should acknowledge the limits of the capacity of activists to sustain actions over time and build in wellbeing support.

2. INTRODUCTION



Waiting for Day 2 eviction

Bendigo Street is a small suburban street in inner-north Melbourne, Australia. In 2014, the state government announced the street was to be cut to make way for an access road to a freeway extension and tunnel known as the East West Link (EWL). The local council, Yarra, was opposed to the EWL and backed a community campaign against it. The state government, however, successfully acquired many of the houses on the street under compulsory acquisition laws. The expected demolition did not happen because the state government changed in November 2014 and the new government cancelled the EWL. Yarra Council subsequently called for the empty houses to be used as social housing.

In late 2015 the state government announced that the Bendigo Street houses were being handed over to a housing charity, but six months later activists discovered the houses were still empty. People experiencing homelessness and activists occupied the buildings to draw attention to the issue of homelessness and housing policy failures and to, at a practical level, provide homes for those in need. The campaign lasted for more than eight

months, until the police evicted the residents in November 2016 and the houses were again left empty. This research considers the implications of an emerging coalition focussed on housing justice in urban Australia, particularly in Melbourne. A key group within this activist movement, especially from 2014 to 2017, is the Homeless Persons Union of Victoria (HPUV).

A peer homelessness activist from the HPUV (Kelly) and a local government policy practitioner (Mike) identified the 2016 events, generally known as the Bendigo Street Occupation (which will also be referred to in this paper as 'Bendigo Street'), as a research case study. Anecdotally, Bendigo Street demonstrated some success in raising the profile of Melbourne's homelessness and housing affordability crisis. However, Bendigo Street also demonstrated what appears to be a common experience: confused relationships between activists and government officials, with the latter sometimes being supportive of such actions, but at other times opposed, ambivalent or absent. Many local governments, especially in inner-urban areas, have policy positions that align with the aims of homelessness and housing activists. This research explores how this policy alignment can be translated into effective action.

This research sought to answer two questions. The first question (for the activists) was:

What do housing and homelessness activists need to know about the operation of local councils to achieve desired advocacy and policy outcomes in the housing justice space?

This question sought to discover activists' perceptions and sense of agency in accessing and leveraging the power of Melbourne local councils to achieve housing justice goals. For example, to determine whether there is a perceived lack of transparency surrounding the lines of communication and decision-making structures of local councils for this cohort.

The second question (for local government councillors and officers) was:

When policy goals align, how can local government councillors and officers be better allies to activists in the housing justice space?

This question sought to understand council relationships with activists during actions like that at Bendigo Street and what, if any, barriers may exist that prevent councillors and council employees from using their positions and resources to achieve mutual housing justice goals.



3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The initial research involved collecting documents, correspondence, audio-visual material, and media reports on Bendigo Street. Much of this was drawn from the HPUV email account and Facebook page. On the local government side, we identified and collected council meeting minutes and official correspondence. We examined the sets of material together to gain deeper insights into events and processes and establish a narrative and timeline of events (see Section 5). We also undertook a literature review of urban and housing studies, political theory and governance research to embed the Bendigo Street Occupation in an Australian and international theoretical context.

The University of Melbourne granted ethics approval to allow this project to learn first-hand from people who had direct Bendigo Street involvement. However, obtaining agreement from some interviewees was challenging. A request to interview a council officer at senior management level at Yarra Council was not successful. Requests to some elected councillors were also rejected. In each of these cases the respondents stated that their involvement in Bendigo Street had been limited and they did not believe they would have much to offer. Logistical challenges, rather than apparent unwillingness, proved a barrier to participation for activists. Some people who had been active in Bendigo Street had indicated they were prepared to participate, but a range of health and communication issues meant interviews were not able to be arranged.

However, we were able to conduct interviews with eight authoritative interviewees: four activists intensely involved in the Bendigo Street Occupation, and two councillors and two council officers who had been involved through their local government roles during the occupation. All interviews took place in person

and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, which provided flexibility to investigate topics that emerged during the interview, and the interview recordings were transcribed in full and coded using a Grounded Theory approach. Undertaking a full verbatim transcription was identified as crucial to support an immersion into the content, and to double check the words used. This led to a confidence in drawing conclusions from the interviews where there was either consensus or lack of agreement.¹ Both researchers analysed the interviews, identified themes, and extracted quotes related to the themes. This was an iterative process, with both researchers refining the themes and codes.² The interviewees quoted in this report are identified by their roles: Activist, Council Officer or Elected Councillor.

Notably, both researchers had been involved in the Bendigo Street Occupation events and remained conscious of the risks arising from being participant researchers in terms of bias, relationships with interviewees, and conflicts of interest. In being clear about our positionality, we also recognised the presence of unequal power dynamics: Mike works for local government; Kelly is an activist. It was intrinsic to the project that the researchers worked directly on the data collection in a manner that recognised their peer relationship with interviewees. For this reason, we deployed ethnographically informed research approaches that involved acknowledging and harnessing our roles as 'insiders' to build and maintain trust with interviewees.³

In practice, this meant we both attended all the interviews. Kelly, who has primarily an activist background, took the lead in the interviews with local government participants; Mike, a local government practitioner, took the lead with the activists. This approach arose from the realisation that in most cases, we knew our peers very well and reversing the interview roles would assist the participants to tell their story to a person to whom they had not told the story before.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

POLITICAL POWER AND ACCESS TO HOUSING

The renewal of the central areas of Melbourne from the 1980s led to the disappearance of housing for those on the margins.⁴ Whitzman notes that the rapid increase in homelessness is unsurprising given the affordability of housing crashing, which has resulted in social housing only comprising 3.2% of housing in the state of Victoria.⁵ This creates a situation where some people have no choice but to endure degraded and unhealthy lives on the streets, which has been well documented in previous research.⁶

Access to housing is a point of political contestation. It has been a central issue in discussions about rights to space, health environments and resources in cities since the 1960s. The relationship between political power and ownership of land and resources, and how processes of change happen are also important themes in these discussions. David Harvey calls movements for change as claims for ‘the right to the city’, but contends that occasional uprisings and actions are but a waystation towards the goal of overturning capitalism and that the struggle should be focussed on global financial capital.⁷ The defunct EWL, which was intended to be built by international infrastructure companies, gave global capital a big pay day: in 2015 the newly elected Labor government paid the project consortium \$642m in compensation for cancelling the project.⁸ Despite its cancellation, the project contributed to housing shortages, with more than 300 houses and apartments compulsorily acquired in its planning stages not converted to social housing.

US planning theorist Mark Purcell offers a note of caution regarding ‘the local trap’, which is a prevalent idea that acting within the smallest spatial or geographical scale is preferable for inclusive, just cities. In his consideration of the application of the ideas of Henri Lefebvre, the rights being sought become just the rights of local inhabitants (for example, neighbourhood groups) with no wider scale.⁹ In more recent work, Purcell supportively notes that many communities (‘publics’) are taking power outside of state structures and argues that this is a positive development, given that the state is an oligarchical structure that prevents real democracy.¹⁰ The French theorist Rancière argues that politics is ineffective to constitute change or give space to the voices that are saying what is most important.¹¹ In considering how Rancière’s ideas apply to major events such as the Arab Spring and Occupy in 2011, Davidson and Iveson mused that occupation itself is not a political act, but it becomes one when it is by ‘a group that challenges the part supposed to be played by the bodies in that particular place in the process of declaring their equality’.¹² Chantal Mouffe is influential in her conception of modern urban processes as ones that are working in a ‘post-political’ context. For her, progress is a radical democracy that is not engaged with finding a means to reach solutions but is rather engaging with the diversity of conflicting views in the community as they occur and seeking solutions along the way.¹³



Occupiers outside Supreme Court

OCCUPY HOUSING AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE

In *The Imaginary Slum*, Alan Mayne documents the newspaper representation of inner-city 'slum land' and how it shaped the discourse about urban renewal projects. Inner-city housing areas where working class, poor and non-Anglo migrant residents lived were framed as 'slums' by newspaper writers in the late 1800s.¹⁴ With headlines such as 'Their Trash, our Cash', media reporting of Bendigo Street could arguably be seen as a continuation of this thinking, depicting the occupied spaces as sites of moral decay, unhealthy conditions and violence.¹⁵

In his paper 'The Logic of Urban Squatting', Hans Pruijt conducts a comparative analysis of squatting, proposing five configurations: deprivation-based; as alternative housing strategy; entrepreneurial; conservational; and political. Deprivation-based squatting appears to fit with the Bendigo Street events.¹⁶ Under this configuration, activists secure housing for people who are homeless (squatters) and support them, ideally in state- or church-owned housing where there remains a perception of a moral obligation for this housing to be used by those who need it. The primary claims made by the Bendigo Street occupiers about empty homes and urgent need accords with Pruijt's argument that a good framing of the situation wins supporters and pressures authorities, casting evictions as uncivilised or insensitive.¹⁷

GOVERNMENTS AND HOUSING ACTIVISM

HPUV was founded in response to a perceived lack of representation for those with lived experience of homelessness in the policies and decisions that affected their lives.¹⁸ Drawing on models from other sectors such as mental health and disability, it adopted participatory structures known as 'consumer participation' or 'peer advocacy', although such structures appear to have limited effectiveness in driving both individual and systemic change.¹⁹

The most significant point of conflict in Bendigo Street was arguably between the Victorian state government, the owner of the occupied properties, and the activists. While the application of some of the theories outlined above might challenge that, especially regarding the influence of international finance, it is worth questioning the state government's willingness to engage with the community. The state's own watchdog, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO), found that the government is consistently guilty of undertaking incomplete consultation processes. It also found that no overarching public participation framework exists in Victoria to drive activities and promote consistency of practice.²⁰

The participation and consultation situation at a local government level is more complex, with some indications it mirrors state government practices²¹ and others showing a more conducive environment.²² Browne et al. contend that Victorian local governments punch above their weight in policy areas that relate to housing and health, but that support and integration with state government is limited. The importance of a strong policy position regarding the inclusion of diverse community members has been identified as a key factor in garnering support for social housing projects in gentrifying areas.²³

One pertinent international example is contained in the 2017 BBC documentary *Greece's Haven Hotel*, which features a hotel in Athens that had been occupied due to the lack of facilities provided by the Greek government to refugees fleeing the Middle East and Africa. The documentary includes interviews with local and state government officials and examines how the local government not only did not act against the occupiers, it actually found ways to support them.²⁴

Another example is Barcelona, where a radical community movement initially focussed on housing (using occupation as a key strategy) ended up running the local government.²⁵ Operating under the banner of 'municipalism', an approach that has taken root across Spanish cities, the new Barcelona government has already supplied 4000 new units of public housing.²⁶

5. OCCUPATION TIMELINE

The cancellation of the EWL project following the election of the Andrews Labor government in 2014 meant that more than 300 houses and apartments slated for demolition instead remained in the Victorian Government's possession and sat idle. Many of the properties were in Yarra Council's municipality, with eight of these properties situated along Bendigo Street. Yarra was the smallest Melbourne metropolitan council by size and population, but one in ten households lived in social housing, many in the high-rise towers that dominate the skylines of the suburbs of Richmond, Fitzroy and Collingwood. During 2015, council officers were trying to progress a proposal with the state government and community housing providers to ensure that the Bendigo Street houses were converted to social housing. The state government did not appear to support the proposal, and the council passed a resolution in September 2015 calling for the houses to be used by the state as public housing.²⁷ Soon after that, the state government announced that Magpie's Nest, a Salvation Army and Collingwood Football Club joint project, would be allocated twenty of the EWL dwellings to house people who were homeless.²⁸

In March 2016, three women heard about a street full of empty houses in Collingwood. They were without a home and decided to move into 16 Bendigo Street. Within days, a garden maintenance worker reported their presence in the house to authorities, and within hours of that report they were evicted by police in the presence of state government officers.²⁹ News of the eviction spread fast around activist circles. The HPUV was aware of the public announcement that some of the EWL houses were to be allocated to Magpie's Nest and contacted the organisation to ask which, if any, houses on the street had been already tenanted or allocated. A curt reply from Magpie's Nest stated that it had tenanted all the allocation from the state government and any empty houses in Bendigo Street had nothing to do with the organisation.³⁰

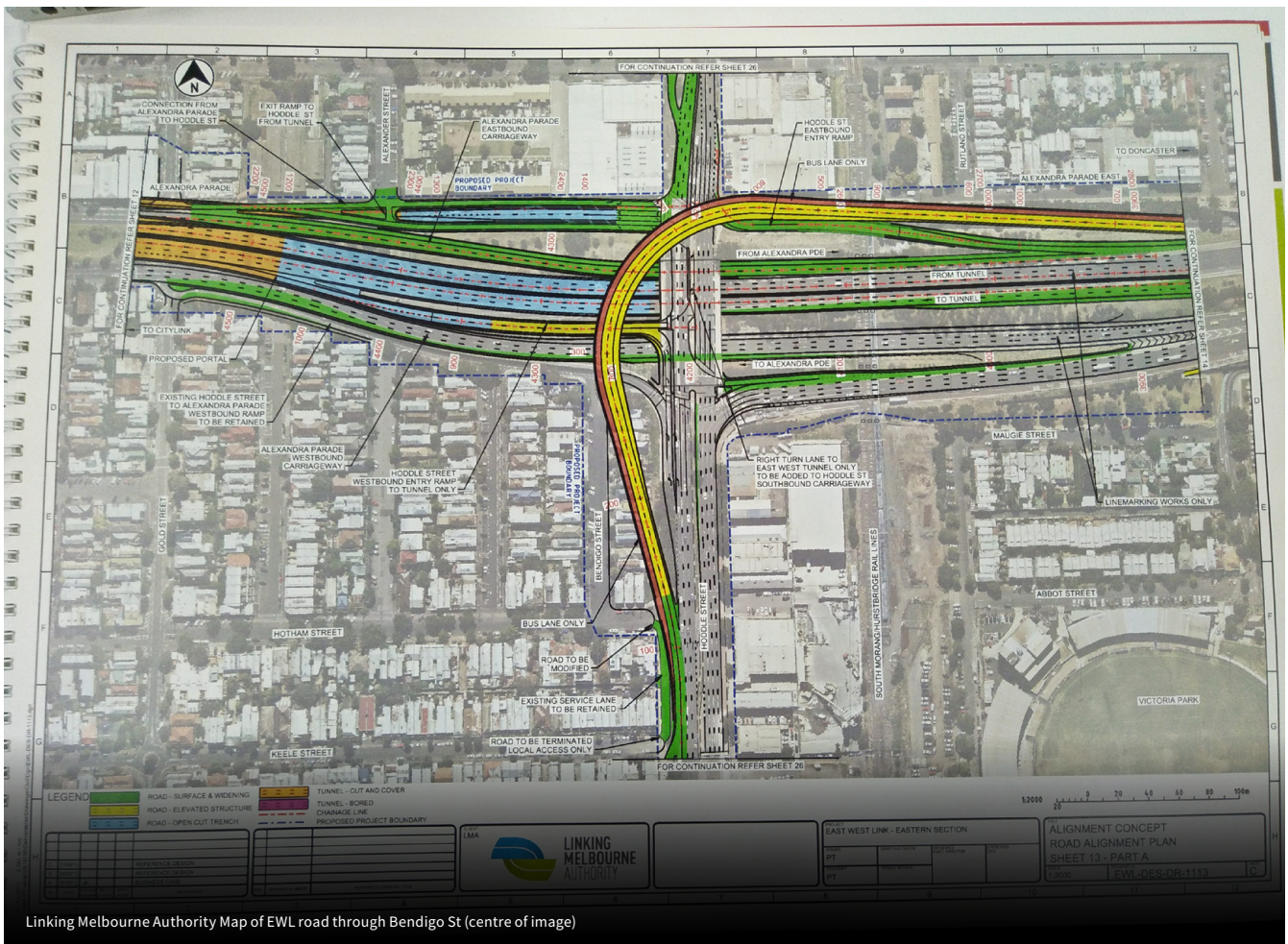
A protest event to draw attention to the houses being left empty when so many people needed homes was organised outside 16 Bendigo Street on 30 March 2016. Events moved quickly. Police and property agents arrived on site and were unable to answer who they were acting for when claiming the protesters were trespassing.³¹ A Yarra councillor was present and made some enquiries by phone to check that the state government still owned the houses. As the day progressed, activists moved into 18 Bendigo Street and the protest morphed into an occupation. Overnight, the Bendigo Street Occupation became a mainstream media story and supporters arrived, taking over 2 Bendigo Street, which became the campaign hub.³² By Day 3, the activists agreed on six demands:

- Full release of information on the ownership status of the East-West Link properties
- The unused houses on Bendigo St to be made into 'genuine public housing'
- All unoccupied properties acquired for the East-West Link that are still in the government's possession to be added to the public housing register
- Minister for Housing Martin Foley to come to Bendigo Street and speak with people with experience of homelessness
- The Andrews government to say how they intend to provide housing for 25,000 homeless people while there are 80,000 unoccupied dwellings in Melbourne³³

Activists attended and addressed a scheduled Yarra Council meeting four days later, where a resolution was passed committing the council to 'make representations to the Minister of Housing requesting that he meet with the representatives of groups currently occupying vacant houses (in Bendigo Street)'.³⁴ Three months later the council wrote to the HPUV to confirm that the minister, in response to the council's 'strong advocacy', had declined to meet the HPUV. Over the months of April and May, activists occupied empty EWL houses in other suburbs such as nearby Clifton Hill and in Parkville. For a short period, they also turned an empty warehouse building into a performance and arts hub. The occupation received support from the Greens Party in the form of speeches in state and federal parliaments. What had begun as a political action about housing and homelessness had also become a provider of housing.

Some weeks into the action, Yarra Council officers began meeting with police, state government representatives and other community organisations to seek a resolution that did not involve forced evictions by police. At no point were the HPUV or any other individuals or groups involved in the occupation invited to these meetings. Meanwhile, more people moved in, including Aboriginal elders and family groups with children. The council offered Richmond Town Hall as the venue for a Hypothetical-style public discussion called Homelessness Can Happen To Anyone. Run by the HPUV, the discussion attracted 100 attendees who were entertained and informed by a line-up of speakers from people with lived experience of homelessness, academia and the legal profession.³⁵

However, the Bendigo Street Occupation dynamic changed in August when the state government served formal eviction notices. The occupiers quickly applied to the Supreme Court and gained an interim injunction.³⁶ The legal process took three months, with community legal centres and pro bono support from big law firms backing up occupiers' powerful testimony. The state government's argument that the houses were blocking women and children escaping family violence from getting housed were countered with evidence that women and children escaping family violence were occupying Bendigo Street because the state government had not assisted them.³⁷ Through the legal process and related scrutiny, it was revealed that only three of the occupied houses had ever been allocated for future use as social housing. The activists'



subsequent focus was on preventing the state government from selling the other houses to the private market. In late August a street festival occurred.

While the Bendigo Street Occupation continued, occupations of individual flats and houses in other parts of the inner-city fell away, with intimidation by unnamed officials and security personnel reported as common reasons for occupants' departures. Some neighbours also withdrew their support, perhaps tiring of the adverse media and police attention.³⁸ In a meeting called at a local pub, activists were pitted against community members, and accusations were made that some of the occupiers posed a danger to residents. Meetings were set up in the nearby council facility, Collingwood Town Hall, where state government officials made offers of public housing tenancies to many of the people who had been living in houses on Bendigo Street for months. However, as some occupiers left Bendigo Street, new people in need of housing arrived. Over time the police presence became more pronounced, with an Aboriginal elder who had been living in one of the houses dragged into a police van in the middle of the night for an alleged unpaid public transport fine. Some houses were taken over by private security guards who maintained a 24-hour presence.

Then, on 4 November, a visitor to one of the occupied houses died from a suspected drug overdose.³⁹ This tragic event brought a wave of new mainstream media attention, now overwhelmingly adverse, with headlines such as 'Street fight to get ugly' and 'Bendigo Street "beyond the pale" after death: housing minister'.⁴⁰ At the same time the court processes were turning in the state government's favour. Activists from across the city were re-engaged, with callouts to attend Bendigo Street as the threat of forced eviction by police became more likely. On 23 November 2016, the final three occupied houses on the street were emptied by large numbers of police wearing riot gear. No provision was offered for the future housing of those dragged onto the street.

Some of the Bendigo Street houses have since been sold to the private market, and it is unclear if any have become social housing filled from the now unified public and community housing register. This Victorian Housing Register, or waiting list, stood at 55,000 as of March 2022.⁴¹

6. FINDINGS

A number of key themes emerged from the interviews and created a frame for deeper investigation of the research questions. This report makes extensive use of direct quotes from interviews. While the quotes can be useful to provide facts, they are used primarily to give voice to the participants whose voices often go unheard and to illustrate the compelling narratives for the reader.⁴² As Sally Thorne observes, a quote is not necessarily pinning up proof of an idea but ‘... rather capturing a window into the human story that led you, as the researcher, to come to “know” something in a new way’.⁴³

6.1. PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Nobody, it seems, was thinking about the possibility of occupying empty houses to support a political campaign, until it happened.

We had a breakfast party as a, I suppose, a stunt, just to appease the neighbours, and to try and get attention from passers-by. Heaps of people turned up. (Activist)

Those starting the Bendigo Street action included many experienced and knowledgeable housing and homelessness campaigners. Their arguments for an urgent state response to a growing housing crisis had been bolstered by research released a few months before, which calculated the number of empty properties in Melbourne to be more than 80,000.⁴⁴ Then the story of three unhoused women being summarily removed by state officials, who were themselves backed up by police, from a Bendigo Street house offered a narrative that could mobilise grassroots action and garner both political and media attention. There was some sense among the activists that a local community and council that had opposed the EWL project may also be supportive on housing issues.

Actually, having a representative from council there, it seemed to make them [Victoria Police] consider what was going on in a more delicate way. Not so heavy-handed. Like we can just wipe these scallywags off the street and brush it under the carpet again, and it's all dealt with. (Activist)

The active and supportive participation of an elected local councillor on the first day of the action was meaningful. The councillor appeared respected by the police and was able to obtain confirmation that the state government still owned the houses. While some activists expressed a view that the councillor was acting only for political advantage in front of the attending media, their assistance and support may have been a catalyst for a protest on the street to move inside the houses themselves.

It seemed to me to be a no-brainer. An appalling situation that the HPUV [felt obliged] stepped in to do something about. To force the issue. With state inaction that looked like it was going to go on forever. And vacant houses. (Council Officer)

The activists had little knowledge that social policy officers at Yarra Council had been engaged, since 2014, in what could be described as a process of persuasion over the future of the empty EWL houses. Council officers had undertaken detailed analyses of each of the houses as part of a push for the state government to use them to provide short-term accommodation for people on the public housing waiting list or to redevelop the houses to create more social housing stock. Six months earlier, the Yarra councillors had unanimously called on the state government ‘to either transfer these homes to public housing stock or to discuss options with the council about how these properties could be used as emergency accommodation’.⁴⁵ A subsequent surprise announcement that the state government was transferring twenty unspecified EWL houses to the Magpie’s Nest organisation seemed a positive response. However, six months later activists claimed that all of those homes on Bendigo Street were either empty or, based on their observations, occupied by Salvation Army workers.⁴⁶

6.2. ‘WE ARE A BIT OF A FOREIGN LAND’

I don't think people really understand local governments and how we work. I think that we're kind of a bit of a foreign land. (Council Officer)

Bendigo Street seemed to have the effect of sidelining the Yarra Council advocacy push. Specialist officers who were advocating for action on the empty houses found that they were largely kept ‘out of the loop’ once the action started.

I remember trying to ask a few people what was going on, but I did very much get the sense that the conversation was locked down to a handful of people and it was being managed. (Council Officer)

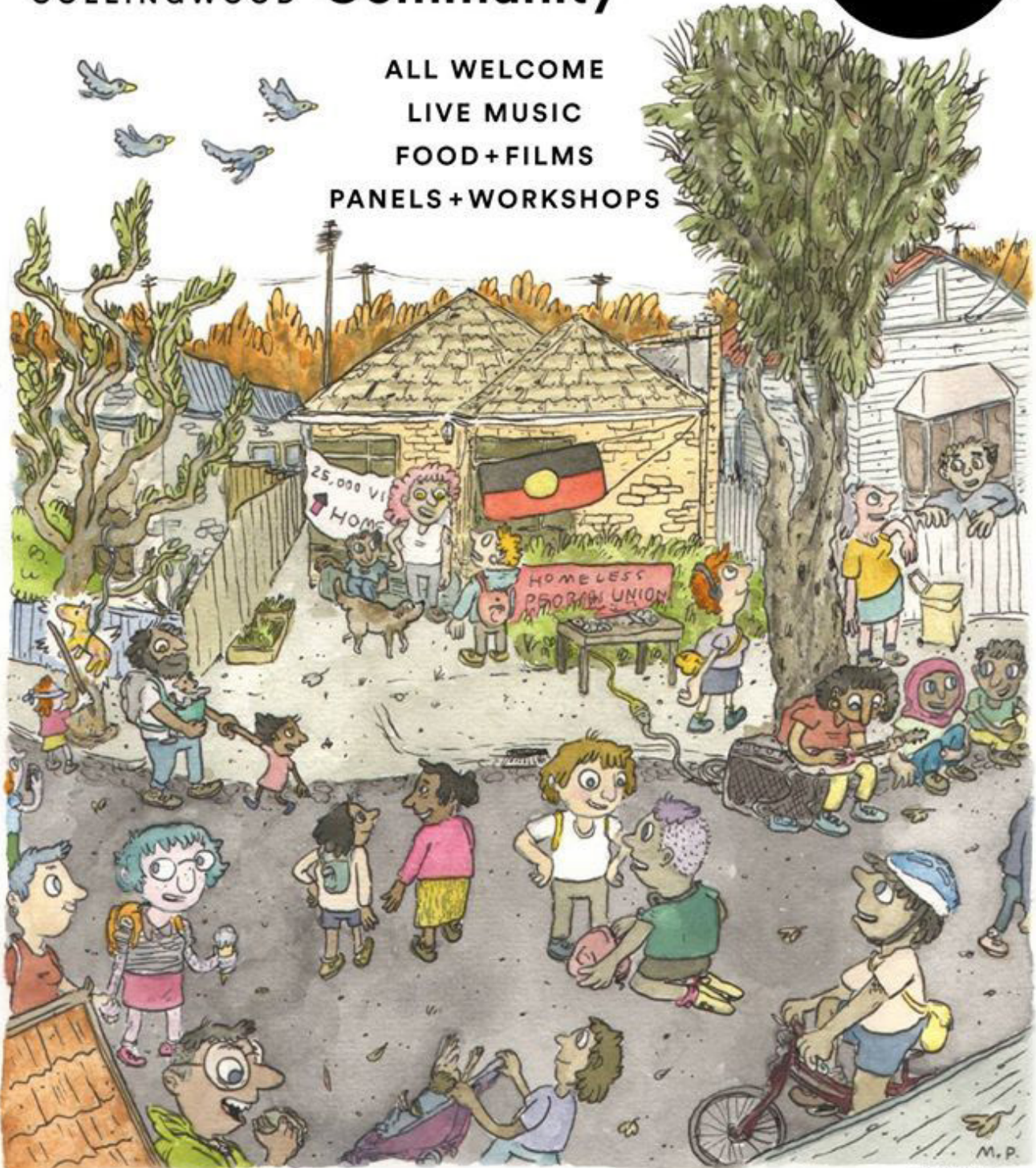
In a demonstration of openness to listening to and working with their constituents, many local governments allocate time in their formal meetings for people to ask questions, make statements or present petitions. Five days into the Bendigo Street Occupation, three activists asked questions of the nine Yarra councillors. It was an unfamiliar space for the activists, and it wasn’t clear to them who was who in the room. Council meetings are attended by elected councillors and senior officers, but the roles of those present are not generally explained to community members. The activists felt that although the councillors and senior officers made supportive statements during the meeting, there were other political machinations at play. The activists were also frustrated that there was no opportunity offered to discuss the housing justice issues outside the formal proceedings.

BENDIGO ST Festival

COLLINGWOOD Celebrating Community

SUNDAY
28th AUG
11-6

ALL WELCOME
LIVE MUSIC
FOOD+FILMS
PANELS+WORKSHOPS



This Sunday, join us as we celebrate almost 5 months of fighting homelessness and building community in Narm Melbourne by occupying previously vacant East-West Link properties. Many houses along Bendigo Street will open their doors, to share food, live music, workshops, film screenings, and conversations about housing and homelessness.



facebook:
HOUSES NEED PEOPLE
PEOPLE NEED HOUSES
#bendigost
#ewlinkhouses

Bendigo St Festival poster

They were being really nice to some of us, and encouraging us ... It was really confusing. It was like, 'Why are these obvious arseholes trying to take our side?' Someone explained to us that it was maybe something about bikes, some kind of issue that it was advantageous to them. (Activist)

An elected councillor recalled that although the activists presented well in the chamber, the councillors were 'wedged on the issues' and couldn't offer full support. The councillor thought the physical environment itself was intimidating, with the high Victorian era ceilings, oil colour portraits of former mayors, and the formality of the process and language.

Several interviewees described 'neoliberal' or 'capitalist' organisational cultures that exist in the senior management of local government that lower ranking officers have to be aware of, or even wary of. Local government interviewees emphasised that an 'authorising environment' needs to be created by the elected representatives for officers to take effective action. Interviewees did not agree on whether having a single councillor champion a cause or issue is enough.

Unless there's a motion from a sympathetic councillor, which can empower staff, who are quite sympathetic, then often the staff are quite hamstrung in this big bureaucracy. They don't have authority to act unless they're the big bosses. (Elected Councillor)

Despite the presence of one councillor on the first day of the occupation, the other councillors did not respond to subsequent invitations to meet with the occupiers. Some activists felt like Yarra Council was absent and treating the occupation with a type of benign neglect. There were, however, examples of informal assistance and support that council officers gave. On days when events were held on the street outside the houses, staff appeared in council utes in the morning, closed the street using safety barriers and signage, and then cleared the barriers away after the events. A particular officer is remembered by one of the activists interviewed for this research for their consistent engagement over the eight months. This officer had previously worked with some of the activists on projects about homelessness and other human rights issues.

[The council officer] came along and listened to us, supported us in various ways, like helping us with mobile phones, liaising between the Victoria Police and the union [HPUV]. Assisting us with having meetings at different libraries, so that we could engage the public at different venues. (Activist)

6.3. CLARITY OF AIMS AND THEIR CHANGING NATURE OVER TIME

I remember being surprised when we even went into one of the houses. Obviously there were people there who had thought about that aspect of it, but I don't think anyone thought we would be there 24 hours later, let alone months and months later. (Activist)



Street party

The activists had quickly established a set of aims relating to both the empty EWL houses and broader housing policy. However, both local and broader circumstances changed significantly over time.

The 8 Bendigo Street lounge room became a site where the activists held rolling meetings and debates about what to do next and why they were there at all. Alerted by mainstream media stories and social media posts across political and social activist networks, people answered the call to turn up with food, household items and ideas.

There was lots of meetings, something started to emerge ... We were getting sheets of butcher's paper and just writing questions, and the walls were just full of all these questions ... [laughter] ... We didn't know what we were doing, but staying there certainly seemed to be important. (Activist)

As property after property was occupied by activists, the HPUV tried to keep the focus on its original demands through briefing the mainstream media and providing text and video updates via social media. A public call from Yarra Council for the Housing Minister, Martin Foley, to meet with the activists offered hope, but as weeks went by no progress was apparent. In fact, councillors and council officers had considered any agreement by the state government to meet activists unlikely from the start.

On the ground, the Bendigo Street Occupation evolved. The legal action was a constant pressure. The legal argument that needed to be made to halt evictions was about whether the state was able to evict occupiers into homelessness, rather than about the occupation's larger political demands. The activists also had to contend with concurrent and continuous media pressure, much of it now negative, as the state government pushed a narrative that the Bendigo Street occupiers were keeping 'deserving' people from moving into the housing.

Yarra Council was known as being a strong supporter of the rights of people who were unhoused, with one activist describing the council as a 'mecca of homelessness policy'. The sense of comfort that this local council had a human rights agenda was echoed by council officers, who described years of effort and some success before 2016 in improving local responses to rough sleepers. So, while the state government consistently emphasised both the illegality and even immorality of the occupation, the discussions within council always had a sympathetic tone.

So I think that there was not an antipathy internally. I think that this local government probably has a long history of that kind of supporting people fighting for what they feel is right. So I didn't hear anyone talking about how we just have to sort it. End it. (Council Officer)

It appeared that few people across the local community wanted to say anything publicly against the activists and their cause. Even when a Bendigo Street neighbour came to a Yarra Council meeting

in August with a complaint about the occupiers' actions, the elected officials did not respond sympathetically. The neighbour was directed to contact police rather than council, and it was further clarified that Yarra Council 'is involved in the amenity, streetscape and waste management; we can only facilitate services, officers can liaise with the homeless and suggest they take up the facilities provided by agencies ... but [the council] cannot enforce anything'.⁴⁷ However, the council was becoming increasingly concerned about what have been variously described as 'complaints', 'concerns' or just 'hearing things' that were brought to its attention.⁴⁸ There seems no doubt that the negative feedback that the council was receiving from some in the local community had a chilling effect on the council's enthusiasm to fully support Bendigo Street. For one activist this brought up a common frustration that people are more likely to go to council with a complaint than a compliment or expression of support, and that this skews the perspective on community sentiment.

You might get one complaint and it might seem as though the entire world is falling apart because that person's upset. That happens all the time. Which is great if you're the complainer. But it's not really how it is. There were hundreds of people who visited Bendigo Street in support, and many of them were local residents who supplied food, felt very strongly ... were very, very supportive of the demonstration. (Activist)

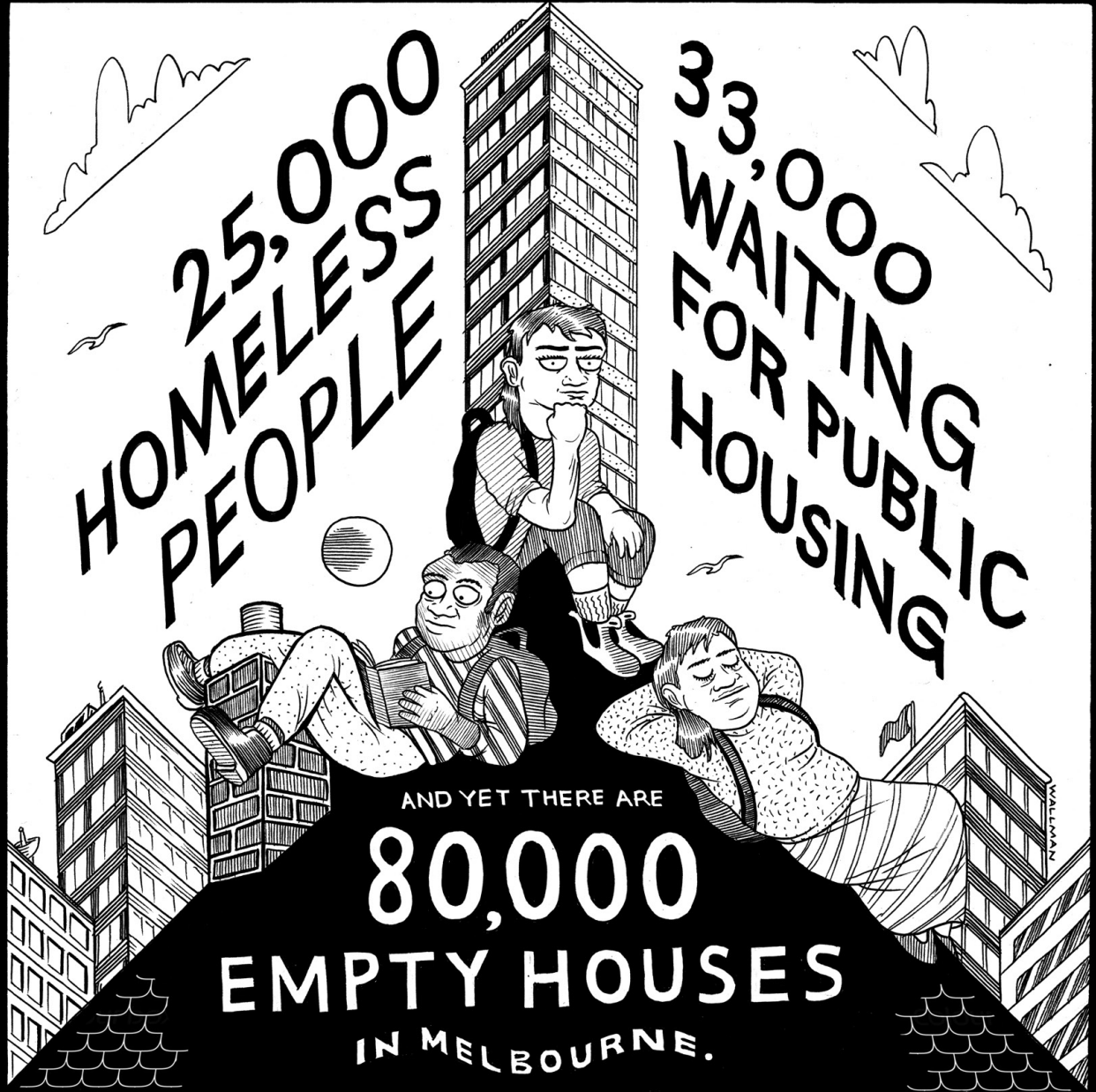
6.4. LEGITIMACY

Bendigo Street was an action without appointed leaders or a formal organising structure. One council interviewee suggested this was a weakness, and a factor in the lack of control the activists exercised over the perceived problematic behaviour of some occupiers. Another saw it as indicating a lack of clear goals for the action. In contrast, the activists tell a story of a success in flexible, inclusive self-organising, which is notable given that the circumstances they faced changed significantly over time. The activists were confident and canny in their engagement with the media. For example, claims made by the state government that they were taking homes away from legitimate seekers of urgent housing were countered with powerful lived-experience testimonies from those who had found a home in Bendigo Street. Still, influential media outlets in Melbourne, in particular the News Limited daily tabloid the Herald Sun and news radio station 3AW, presented stories with a repetitive narrative that the occupiers were illegitimate. One activist who had been a prominent spokesperson for the Occupation opened the Herald Sun to read his name and an account of criminal activity he had been involved in many years before.

It was a way in my mind to dismiss the action, by saying, 'Oh it's just people who are rabble or criminals involved in it'. It had nothing to do with the action. It's from the past. I've got a human right to only be punished once. How many times do I to have it brought back up and thrust in my face? (Activist)

WE ARE NOW OCCUPYING VACANT HOUSES IN COLLINGWOOD TO HIGHLIGHT THE

MELBOURNE HOUSING CRISIS



FOOD & FILM NIGHT!!!

MON
4TH
APRIL
7PM

JOIN US FOR SOME FOOD & SHORT FILMS INCLUDING 'REAL ESTATE 4 RANSOM' & FIND OUT WHAT WE'RE UP TO.

2 BENDIGO STREET

COMMUNITY MEETING!

JOIN SPEAKERS FROM THE BENDIGO STREET OCCUPATION TO DISCUSS THE HOUSING CRISIS AND THE BROADER STRUGGLE FOR FAIR HOUSING.

THUR
7TH
APRIL
7PM

IN COLLINGWOOD

On 11 July 2016, the HPUV received an email from the council that provided the first update on the commitment the council had made three months before to facilitate a meeting with the state government. The email stated that the state government was not willing to meet the activists directly but offered no further details. The email also mentioned a meeting where the council, Victoria Police and representatives of local community organisations met to discuss the Bendigo Street Occupation. At the meeting, the council encouraged a peaceful resolution of the occupation, and the police agreed that this was their preferred outcome.

To some activists, the email's content and the inability to secure a state government meeting was just council acting within its limitations as a 'bit player'. For others, there was frustration and disappointment in officers and elected officials quietly taking benevolent actions on behalf of the activists and relaying their support in private but not being willing to go public with it.

They tolerated us. They were happy to hear about it. They even passed a motion of support. But that's as far as it was ever going to go for them. It was morally sound. It was just too outrageous to the middle class. What they could have done is set up a community meeting and invite the police, the department, the minister. And they could have heard from the people who were living there, from the people who had been homeless, members of the Stolen Generations, people that had been living in factories, single mums. (Activist)

That neither the HPUV nor other representatives of the Bendigo Street occupiers were invited to meetings was seen as unremarkable to council interviewees. It was explained that hierarchical organisations are not comfortable with representatives from groups where it is not clear what roles and authority their representatives have.

[the thinking is] I need to know what your position is, control the way things are talked about. We don't want any wildcards here. (Council Officer)

6.5. WHAT WAS ACHIEVED

It was seen through to the end, which I think is an amazing model for people who really are the most voiceless and most marginalised. So I think it really changed an understanding amongst the political side of homelessness throughout Melbourne. (Council Officer)

The interviewees held differing views around the Bendigo Street Occupation achievements, but all were positive in their assessments. For those in local government, the focus the occupation put on the affordable housing provision crisis was unprecedented: 'They pulled up the carpet and no one could deny what was underneath'.

Claims that Bendigo Street was a disruptive and damaging experience for those permanently living in the neighbourhood are hard to assess within the scope of this research. Notably, the stories of danger, crime and drug dealing that formed part of the 'what was being heard' as the Bendigo Street action continued do not appear to be substantiated in documented records. Despite the relentlessly negative media coverage (including that around the tragic death from a drug overdose of a visitor to one of the houses), there was a consistent sense of pride among the activists that they had put housing justice on the political agenda much more effectively than ever before. Bendigo Street had put into effect the HPUV's slogan 'No Longer the Unheard Voice'.⁴⁹

Everyone was talking about it—3AW, government, residents. Protest marches happen every day of the week in Melbourne, but they are not reported or talked about. Bendigo street captured everyone's attention. (Elected Councillor)

Then there was the practical outcome of housing being provided to those who needed it. The activist position was that no one would be turned away. While the numbers are unclear as some activists who spent time occupying had secure housing elsewhere, the HPUV estimates the occupation across the various locations ensured 58 people were housed over eight months. Over time, the Bendigo Street occupiers came to look like a microcosm of the unhoused population: single mothers with young children escaping intimate partner violence; First Nations people, including elders; young people excluded from safe housing options by poverty and cultural exclusion. The action was triggered by the eviction of three women from one of the houses and state government officials cursorily handing over a leaflet with helpline phone numbers. The state government's later attempt to evict occupiers was delayed by months as the Supreme Court required the state to undertake a human rights assessment of the effect of eviction on the people living in the Bendigo Street houses. This led, in a number of cases, to occupiers gaining secure homes in public housing.

They got housing and they lived. And they are grandparents and parents. And they're safe. And they're not dead. I know these people are still housed. And like, 'Sweet. That's great.' I'm so glad I get to be a part of that. I know that they're getting an opportunity to make a contribution. A meaningful contribution in their lives. (Activist)

Making all the EWL-purchased houses in Bendigo Street available as social housing was a central demand. It is notable that some interviewees erroneously believed that the state government did undertake this after all the occupiers had been removed from the street. For others, being told that this research had found that a number of homes had been sold off on the private market was met with what could be best described as a tired shrug.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1. TESTING THE RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS

If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but by all means keep moving. (Dr Martin Luther King)⁵⁰

The local government interviewees agreed with the assumption that housing activists taking action to occupy space could, or should, be supported by a local council that already had established progressive housing policies. Although Yarra Council may have talked the talk early on, the walk it walked, to use Dr King's metaphor, was more like a crawl that all but stopped within weeks.

In matters of contestation in urban governance, local governments in Melbourne have in recent years moved, with some pushing from the state government, towards an inclusive, consensus-seeking communicative approach that, in theory, recognises and accommodates different views and interests. However, where it is clear that a consensus will not be achieved, this approach entails an incentive for avoidance. Neither Yarra Council as an organisation nor any of its elected councillors ever made any public statements or issued communication that was critical of the Bendigo Street Occupation. The council appears to have taken a view that Bendigo Street was not going to be resolved with anything like a consensus agreement between the activists and the state government. So, rather than recognising and working with the conflictual nature of the situation as might befit the possibility for radical democracy that Mouffe imagines, it withdrew.⁵¹

Some of the activists had strong ideas around the need for local government to play a supportive role. For others it was good the local government provided some support, but they did not expect it. There was no sense that accepting support from the council negatively affected the action itself. The interviewees talked about local government less as a distinct arm of the state, but rather as one that exists in a position of some tension with the central, in this case state, government. Local government in Australia is different from jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom where the local governments are responsible for the social housing system. Yet this weak legislated role in housing may be seen as a strength as it enables it to support grassroots action.

If Mouffe assists us in understanding the local political dynamics and missed opportunity for change, the relationship between the activists and the Victorian state government (and its agents enforcing legal action) is very much in the realm of Ranciere's imagining of the post-political world where politics is not the deciding of common affairs but the contention over deciding what is common.⁵² Here the conflict over what to do with the EWL houses was bringing the activists 'into being' in that they had not been recognised as existing before.⁵³ The activists successfully harnessed legal support to delay and reframe eviction orders through court orders that required human rights assessments and framed the issue in the context of a deepening city-wide homelessness crisis for which the state government was

considered responsible. The Bendigo Street Occupation created the possibility of an entirely new driver of policy and process change in housing, something unlikely to have ever been achieved through advocacy by council (and aligned stakeholders) through traditional methods and channels.

7.2. A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE ...

It's councillors that count. It's the elected representatives that have the power to make change. (Elected councillor)

Interviewees from both activist and local government backgrounds identified barriers to effective communication between the activists and the various arms of government. The activists had the most contact with a single council officer and one of the nine councillors, each of whom was limited in their scope to assist. Local government in Victoria operates under legislation and myriad codes and guidelines that are designed to keep elected representatives and council officers away from each other. Council officers are ultimately answerable to the council CEO, and it is the CEO who is meant to communicate with the councillors. In reality, a council's executive management will also have regular dealings with the councillors. This means that most of the time middle managers and the rest of council staff can complete their work with minimal interaction with, or interference from, elected representatives.

In the case of Bendigo Street, the political heat of the action to occupy half a street seems to have reduced the scope of officers who have expertise in fostering good working relationships, and who would possibly even be regarded as 'champions' of the cause, to act. When things get political it takes more than one of the elected officials to consider a matter important enough to instruct the organisation to do something and to authorise adequate resources.

Once the council's done it ... we've got the authorising environment, then we can craft everything. (Council Officer)

A common theme throughout the interviews was that local governments are highly sensitive to complaints from individual community members. This is known as 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease' effect.⁵⁴ The Occupation and the underlying reasons for it attracted demonstrations of support through hundreds of supporters turning up to Bendigo Street events and action, and thousands of supporters liking the HPUV Facebook page and its posts. However, the activists present at Bendigo Street seemed not to be deemed wholly 'acceptable' in representing the people involved in the occupation or the housing and homelessness issue more generally. As with the Occupy actions a few years before, not having a traditional organisational structure resulted in exclusion from key meetings and a lack of engagement with and information-sharing by local and state government representatives.⁵⁵

7.3. WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS GOOD FOR

Australian local governments like Yarra City Council are responsible for many things beyond roads, rates and rubbish, and many choose to invest significant resources, and reputations, towards matters that they are not legislatively required to. In Yarra Council's case, there is a history of supporting people who are homeless and of defending the provision of the public housing that provides a home to one in ten of its residents.⁵⁶ Still, just because Yarra Council did not explicitly support Bendigo Street does not mean taking a public position on significant social issues was beyond the council's scope. For example, the council resisted pressure from the federal government to recognise the 26 January as Australia Day because the day, which is the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet and subsequent dispossession, is one of great pain for First Nations Australians.⁵⁷

If I was here from the beginning, I'd probably look to making [the Bendigo Street Occupation] a social justice issue. That council supported for all the reasons why we want social justice. With an understanding of the impact of not responding. Using our connections and allies [in relation to the Australia Day stance] ... we've now proved that we can stand up and say something. So I think the 26th of January project is a huge precedent for us taking a position where we are just get all ... the federal government coming down on us. People from around Australia ... so having done that, I think that really empowers the council. So I think we're up for anything. (Council Officer)

However, when an action such as an occupation happens, and the occupiers may feel isolated or even under siege, small practical acts of support also matter.

[I think a councillor should] provide certain kinds of support, and to my mind that often looked like [the councillor] being able to, through whatever mechanism, kind of instruct non-elected parts of the council to do things like close off the street. Or like have the capacity, influence that decision to the extent that it would happen ... in cases where ... which ended up happening a lot, a lot of events where we closed off the street and were able to occupy the street. And had a certain amount of certainty that we were going get that kind of support, and that at least the council weren't going come and object. (Activist)

7.4. OCCUPATION AND THE LIMITS OF ACTIVIST ENERGY

So it cost us. I probably need 40 years of therapy. (Activist)

The activists who participated in the research viewed their involvement with a strong degree of pride and a sense of being part of a unique set of events, but the interviews also revealed the activists' exhaustion. Bendigo Street was a practical housing struggle, but it included managing media requests, negotiating with officials, and engaging with the court system—all significant and significantly taxing experiences. The Bendigo Street events demonstrated that there is a strong reservoir of community energy and solidarity that will support such actions, but that energy and solidarity has limits.

There was also the effect of a sustained campaign by the state government and the media to demonise the activists and their intentions. One local councillor implied that the occupation ultimately ended not because of the power differential or lack of systemic change but because the activists were poorly organised. While the HPUV remained a critical voice and the organising force, the business of the occupation necessarily became more complicated as the occupation grew and continued. Different modes of organising arose to meet different needs. Those included the collective organising and agreement strategies, described as gathering and debating for hours, and which involved documenting ideas on whiteboards. One house was named an Aboriginal embassy and run by First Nations peoples. Another house was established specifically to be a safe space for trans and gender non-conforming people. So as the original collectively agreed aims were retained, this political set of aims was gradually replaced with a range of other political agendas such as First Nations recognition and LGBTIQ+ rights. Fundamentally, however, the core of the action remained housing rights and the threat to those rights that led to energies needed not just on the street or in the media but also in different courtrooms and lawyers' offices.

8. WHAT COUNCILS CAN DO TO SUPPORT ACTIVISTS



Occupiers

8.1. MAKE HOUSING THE BUSINESS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In November 2020 the Victorian state government, under the same leadership as in 2016, announced the Big Housing Build: a \$5.3 billion investment primarily in social housing, delivering nearly 10,000 new homes. The then Minister for Housing, Richard Wynne, said that local government was more important than ever regarding this historically significant project.⁵⁸ Now that the state has recognised the depth of the housing crisis as both a political and a funding priority, it creates more dialogical space for councils to actively promote housing as a human right and as essential infrastructure.

8.2. DEVELOP A POLICY FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS

In 2015 Yarra Council had awarded its Australia Day Citizen Award to ‘everyone’ who participated in the campaign to defeat the EWL. The was the same campaign the council had supported very publicly and at a cost of nearly half a million dollars.⁵⁹ While there is a role for elected councillors in ‘championing’ causes, this research has identified there is also a role for local governments in shaping policies that underpin responses to different events. Policies that align a human rights approach with an active role in implementing these rights, such as through political action, could empower officers, especially those with specialist knowledge and existing community networks.

8.3. ENGAGE WELL

In terms of councils’ community engagement, just advising constituents to turn up at a council meeting or belatedly sending an email or letter is not appropriate. In 2017, VAGO noted that ‘common elements missing from councils’ public participation policies include details of when, how and who to engage, an outline of roles and responsibilities, and the resources needed to conduct the activities successfully’.⁶⁰ The 2020 Local Government Act, introduced by the state government, includes explicit provisions for engagement. The Act identifies that, as the level of government closest to the community, local government has to enable participatory democracy. While there may be some degree of hypocrisy in this coming from the level of government that was resolutely disengaged from the Bendigo Street activists and occupiers, the guidance from the state government is somewhat visionary:

The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people is a powerful vehicle for bringing about positive change that a community is invested in. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilise resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as a catalyst for changing policies, programs and practices.⁶¹

This guidance creates an obligation for councils to respond to grassroots activism in a considered and consistent way irrespective of the level of internal momentum (or inertia) regarding the issue. It challenges local governments to go beyond narrowly thinking ‘What do these people want now?!’ to acknowledging, as is clearly the case in housing, that what may be happening is part of a wider issue.

8.4. BE TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE

There are standard governance requirements for the documentation of council meetings, including to record the minutes. Many councils now livestream public meetings and later make the recordings available, meaning everything said and done ‘in the chamber’ remains available for later scrutiny (by those with the patience to scroll through hours of video). Although the council makes calls and sends letters and emails about issues, it is not always required to report on this correspondence or the information it contains. It appears there is considerable discretion by officers in local government regarding how much information is available to interested parties, even at the level of formal letters between mayors, CEOs and senior state officials. This research found that there was some frustration about this among elected councillors: they were not always included in such correspondence so were not always informed on the progress (or the lack of progress) of council work on an issue.

8.5. SHOW UP, LISTEN, LEARN

The nature of local government means that both elected officials and officers do much of their work in a town hall that includes administrative offices and meeting and gathering places. The default setting is that people involved in the locality physically go to the town hall, rather than the other way around. When local government people do leave the office, they do so for meetings (such as with staff in other local organisations) or for events (such as openings of services or buildings). In his book *Sand Talk*, Tyson Yunkaporta outlines his frustration with western knowledge systems being centralised. For that reason, academia is unable to engage in effective dialogue with First Nations knowledge that values respectful observation, interactions within systems and connections with the parts therein.⁶² Yunkaporta argues that the real barrier is that people are too busy ‘filing reports, [conducting] performance reviews and funding proposals’.⁶³ While Yunkaporta is talking about academia, a similar observation could be made of local government organisations.

8.6. TELL THE STORY, COUNTER THE AGENDAS

There has been a reduction in local news provision in recent years.⁶⁴ This has left local governments in a crucial position to communicate quality information about what is happening in communities. That may pose a challenge for councils because their priority is to inform the community about what they are doing or want the community to know, and as a government arm, they tend to take a neutral or even conservative stance when communicating information. However, where local governments lend support on broad political issues, they take a stronger editorial position on social media and in council publications. One example of this is of a council encouraging participation in Extinction Rebellion actions to raise awareness about climate change.⁶⁵

Like all contemporary public organisations, local governments have a team of in-house media and communications advisers who give voice to the mayors and senior council officers in media releases and in responding to media enquiries. These officers will also monitor what is being published through formal media outlets and social media about issues and events in the community. It is common practice for these advisers to coordinate with their counterparts in state and federal government, statutory authorities, and other organisations to disseminate information about matters relevant to local communities. For example, sharing information about scheduled traffic disruptions or sharing public health messages. There are opportunities for such communication teams to use these skills to inform grassroots actions, liaise with activists, or at the very least draw on their information and networks to be able to provide accurate reporting on events.

8.7. SUPPORT CAPACITY AND WELLBEING

Activists who are unhoused or living in poverty are usually operating in survival mode and grappling with multiple issues. For some, the solidarity of being part of a group with a common purpose for change can be life-enhancing. However, it is also reasonable to consider that community or grassroots activism can have a range of detrimental effects on the people involved, ranging from material concerns such as a loss of livelihood, housing or liberty, to poor psychological wellbeing. International research has identified that former activists are likely to have a more disrupted work history and less stable relationships than their peers.⁶⁶ If local governments are seeing their constituents’ activism as a normal, even beneficial, activity they could identify how to include activism in the scope of their health and wellbeing actions. One example has been a council-supported workshop for activists on strategies to avoid burnout.⁶⁷

9. CONCLUSION

Activists need to know that while it may be council officers that they are likely to be communicating with, it's the elected councillors who need to champion their cause if they are going to obtain useful, ongoing support. Attracting a councillor's attention isn't easy, and it is important to understand how much councillors rely on often cautious and conservative local government senior officers for information and advice. Knowing the best approach to achieve positive outcomes requires familiarity with local government policy priorities, processes, and organisational structures. It also requires focus and curiosity, and recognition that each local government will have its own distinctive culture and dynamics.

Local government may be the government arm closest to its constituents, but this research has shown how it can choose to keep itself at a distance based on political and practical factors. However, local government has the potential to be a powerful ally to activists once the 'enabling environment' is switched on. There are many types of effective practical support local government can offer. For example, the council can call the local police station, which will both take the council's call and share information with it. The council can make funds available to the activists to obtain legal advice, and it can assist with media enquiries.

We conclude that Yarra Council's practical actions were meaningful, and arguably at times integral, contributions to the achievements of the Bendigo Street Occupation. However, there are numerous structural improvements that can be made, starting with an acceptance that the engagement with activists in the community is not something to be managed and controlled, but rather is something to be a part of.



Occupiers hold First Nations land lease documents

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