The Removal of Millers Point Public Housing Tenants in Inner-Sydney by the New South Wales Government: Narratives of Government and Tenants

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, the New South Wales (NSW) government announced that it was to move all of the approximately 580 public housing tenants from Millers Point, Dawes Point and The Rocks in inner Sydney, sell the properties and use the proceeds to build social housing. This article, drawing on government media material and in-depth interviews with tenants, examines the removal process and contrasts the government's narrative with that of the tenants. What is argued is that the displacement reflects how in the current neoliberal climate, instrumental rationality is a central feature, i.e. little cognisance is taken of the human cost of policies.

2014年，新南威尔士州政府宣布将580位公租房住户从悉尼内城三个点（Millers Point, Dawes Point, The Rocks）迁出，将土地出售，并将收入用于建设社会住房。本文利用政府媒体材料和对住户的深度访谈，考察拆迁过程，并对比政府叙事与住户叙事。文章指出此次拆迁反映出在目前的新自由主义语境下，工具理性成为核心特点，对政策的人力成本则现有考虑。

Introduction

On the 19th March 2014 the then New South Wales (NSW) Minister for Family and Community Services, Pru Goward, called a press conference in Sydney on an expressway overlooking the Sirius Building, an apartment block purpose built for public housing tenants. She proceeded to announce that all the remaining 293 public housing dwellings constituted by 399 tenancies and 579 tenants (SGS Economics and Panning 2014, p. 3, Mowbray 2017) in the adjacent suburbs of Millers Point, Dawes Point and The Rocks (where the Sirius Building is located) are to be sold on the private market and the tenants moved to other areas. Millers Point and The Rocks are in walking distance of Sydney's famous landmarks – the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House and are amongst Sydney's most sought after and expensive neighbourhoods. In February 2017, there were only 33 tenants still resisting the move; approximately 537 had moved and another 9 had committed to move (Mowbray 2017).

There had been a slow selling off of public housing in the Millers Point area in the decade prior to the removal. In 2008, the NSW government under the control of the Labor Party had sold 29 homes.

However, all the homes sold were vacant and they were sold on a 99 year-leasehold. As will be discussed, the decision by the right of Centre Coalition government[1] (the Coalition regained power in 2011 and was re-elected in 2015) to sell off all of the public housing and move all the residents, however old or infirm or whatever their history in the area, was an enormous shock, especially for older, long-established residents. Many were born in the area or had lived there for most of their lives and had intense place attachment. The history and composition of the area had created a strong community and almost all of the long-term and many of the more recent tenants were vehemently opposed to being moved.

The article has two primary inter-related aims. Firstly, to examine the narrative and strategies used by the NSW government to present the displacement as legitimate and justified and ensure its "success". The second main aim is to contrast the government's narrative with the narrative and perceptions of tenants who have moved and those who are still resisting the move. I argue that the removal of Millers/Dawes Point (henceforth referred to as Millers Point)[2] and Sirius Building tenants illustrates the dominance of instrumental rationality in a climate of austerity and severe neoliberalism. The ascendency of an instrumental rationality perspective has resulted in a minimal focus by the NSW government on the human cost of the removal. Instead tenants have been subject to the full force of the government's ideological and bureaucratic power and after initially resisting almost all ultimately felt that they had no choice but to move.

The next section gives a brief overview of Millers Point and the Sirius Building. I then examine social housing in Australia in the context of neoliberalism and instrumental rationality. This is followed by an outline of the methodological approach. The main section of the paper first outlines the government's narrative justifying the displacement and sale. The justifications are then examined drawing on the narratives of residents. The next section reviews the removal process. Finally, why residents left Millers Point and the Sirius Building is analysed.

The Context: Millers Point and the Sirius Building

Millers Point is the oldest public housing area in Australia. In 1999 it was declared a heritage site. The assessment of significance states,

> Its public housing and its development into a Government corporate town were probably the first such developments in Australia (apart from first settlement) … It is occupied in part by descendants of its earlier communities and retains a strong community spirit … Its unity, authenticity of fabric and community, and complexity of significant activities and events make it probably the rarest and most significant historic urban place in Australia. (NSW Government 1999)

After bubonic plague struck the area in 1900, the Sydney Harbour Trust established to administer Sydney's ports, took control of all the housing in Millers Point. Many homes were demolished or renovated and new ones built (Fitzgerald and Keating 1991). Almost all were built for and occupied by workers who manned the wharves and their families. The homogeneity of the Millers Point population encouraged the development of a tight-knit community as did the inter-generational transfer of the homes. In 1985 the Maritime Services Board (the former Sydney Harbour Trust) handed the housing they owned in Millers Point to the Department of Housing (NSW government) and the letting policy of giving preference to local family members was dismantled (Fitzgerald and Keating 1991). Despite the change, many of the contemporary Millers Point residents have links to the area going back 3 or even 4 generations.

The Sirius Building has had a much shorter history. It is situated in The Rocks, an historic area adjacent to Millers Point, and was completed in 1980. It was built specifically to house public housing tenants that had been displaced by urban redevelopment in The Rocks area in the 1970s (Pickett 2013). The building has 79 apartments of varying sizes and was designed in consultation with potential residents. It is viewed as a superb example of brutalist modern architecture and in July 2016 the Heritage Council of NSW recommended that it be declared a heritage building based on "the integrity of the building's representation of brutalist architecture; and its history as a response to the Green Bans[3] movement of the 1960s and 1970s" (Saulwick 2016).

Social Housing, Neoliberalism and Instrumental Rationality

Historically, the acquiring of housing in Australia has always been viewed as an activity that is the responsibility of the individual rather than government (Jacobs 2015). In contrast to the situation in many countries in Europe where public/social housing is a major component of the housing profile (Scanlon *et al.* 2014), in Australia it has never exceeded more than 6% of the housing stock (Troy 2012). There have been periods of expansion. Thus, most recently, after coming back into power in 1983, the Labor Party committed itself to a substantial expansion of the public housing sector and in the period between 1985 and 1995 about 115,000 public housing dwellings were built (McIntosh 1997). However, despite the increase in the number of public houses, from 273,000 in 1985 to 388,600 in 1995 (McIntosh 1997), the waiting list for public housing continued to grow. In 1983 there were about 125,000 people on the waiting list (Wilkinson 2005) and in 1996, there were 234,667 (Australian Council of Social Service 2002). The growth in the waiting list contributed to Labor's support for public housing waning and perhaps the turning point in the growth of public housing in the contemporary period was the comment by the Labor Party prime minister, Paul Keating, in 1995, that the way to "reduce the public housing waiting lists [is] by improving the scope for people to choose private rental accommodation" (in Wilkinson 2005). The shift in the government's focus saw a massive increase in the budget allocation for Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). CRA is a "non-taxable income supplement" paid to low-income households in the private rental sector and community[4] housing. This was accompanied by a substantial decline in the public housing budget. Expenditure on CRA increased from approximately one quarter of public housing expenditure in 1984–85 to approximately one and a half times the expenditure on public housing by 1994–95 (McIntosh and Phillips 2001). The number of CRA recipients nearly doubled – increasing from 491,000 in 1984–85 to 931,500 in 1994–95 (Wulff 2000) and the average level of assistance went from about $200 per recipient per year in 1985 to approximately $1600 a year by 1997 (Yates 1997).

The coming into power federally of the conservative Coalition government in 1996 saw a deepening of the neoliberal agenda[5] (Castles 2001, Connell 2006) and the building of new public housing came to a virtual standstill. Thousands of existing public housing dwellings were sold off or demolished and the number of public housing dwellings declined from about 388,600 in 1995 to 335,000 in June 2005 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005). It is clear that public housing does not sit well with a neoliberal government (Rolnik 2013). It has been viewed as a public asset and ongoing expense that should be privatised if at all possible or alternatively handed over to community housing. As Harvey (2007, p. 65) comments, "Neoliberals are particularly assiduous in seeking the privatization of assets … Sectors formerly run or regulated by the state must be turned over to the private sphere and be deregulated (freed from any state interference)". In a similar vein, Chun (2016, p. 560) argues that in a severe neoliberal context "nothing will remain untouched by the drive to monetise every imaginable and imagined private and public domain constituting and constitutive of our everyday lives". Davies (forthcoming) makes the important point that "The critical distinction between liberalism and neo-liberalism is that the latter abandons the vision of market and state as independent and ontologically distinct entities". Interestingly, neoliberalism means more not less state intervention. As Peck and Tickell (2007, p. 33) conclude, the neoliberal programme "involves the rollout of new state forms, new modes of regulation, new regimes of governance, with the aim of consolidating and managing both marketization and its consequences". Certainly the displacement of residents and the sell-off of Millers Point and the Sirius Building involved substantial state involvement and new practices.

Springer (2012, p. 136) emphasises that neoliberalism needs to be understood not only as a material practice but also as a "particular discourse". Thus the "transfer of ownership from the state or public holdings to the private sector or corporate interests … necessarily involves a conceptual reworking of the meaning these categories hold". Neoliberal ideologues thus constantly endeavor to impose and rein-force a particular framing of social reality. The way this is done will take different forms depending on the context: "In different geographical and institutional contexts neoliberal discourse will circulate and function in variegated ways that intersect with the local culture and political economic circumstances

to continually (re)constitute 'the social'" (Springer 2012, p. 141). In the Australian context, governments are careful to ensure that the public does not perceive that the promotion of a strong neoliberal agenda is unfair or unjust. Thus a widespread perception that neoliberal policies are accentuating inequality and undermining the notion of a "fair go" can be electorally disastrous (Grattan 2014). This was an important premise shaping the government's discourse around the Millers Point removal.

A further feature of neoliberalism is the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality in policy-making (Brown 2006). When instrumental rationality is dominant, little or no attention is paid to the human cost of policy as long as the policy is viewed as effective. In the era of neoliberalism, effectiveness is invariably equated with a deepening of the market. As Brown (2006) concludes,

> neoliberalism takes distance from conventional moral discourse in its affirmation of a wholly instrumental rationality: it affirms market strategies across all fields of life and is formally indifferent to the ends for which these strategies are employed.

Similarly, Dillard and Ruchala (2005, p. 611) argue that instrumental rationality in the context of neoliberalism, has the effect of dissipating any consideration of the human cost and fosters what they call "administrative evil":

> Hierarchical accountability and control structures predicated on, and supportive of, instrumental rationality dehumanize the objects of action, allowing them to be expressed in purely technical, ostensibly neutral terms. Actions affecting human beings are preconditioned to be viewed with moral indifference. The capacity for ethical evaluation is lost as quantitative and financial terms come to dominate the representational space, significantly reducing the link between the actor, the act, and the outcome … Accounting and accounting systems are central in formulating quantitative and financial representations as well as rational decision models and, therefore, in fostering administrative evil.

In NSW, the state where Sydney is located, the Coalition government intensified what was already a strong neoliberal agenda pursued by the previous Labor government. I argue and illustrate that in the case of the displacement of Millers Point and Sirius Building tenants, this strong neoliberal stance was accompanied by an approach dominated by instrumental rationality.

Research Approach

The article draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 29 residents. The interviewee profile is represented in Table 1.

For residents interviewed who have moved away from Millers Point and the Sirius Building, the number of years that they resided there ranged from 1 to 63 years and 11 of the 17 interviewees had lived in the area for at least 30 years. For those who had remained, the number of years that they have resided in the area ranged from 20 to 84 years, with an average of 52 years.

In the case of tenants interviewed who had moved, the semi-structured interviews covered the following themes: accommodation, why they decided to move, everyday life in the new area compared to life in the old, perceptions of the new area, accommodation in the new area, social ties in the new area, family support, the health impacts of the move and how they saw the future. Interviewees who had not

Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

		Residing in Millers Point at the time of interview	Moved away from Millers Point at time of interview
Number of interviewees	Total	12	17
Sex	Male	2	9
	Female	10	8
Age	Under 50 years	–	3
	50–64 years	3	7
	65–70 years	4	4
	70–75 years	3	–
	Over 80 years	2	3
	Oldest interviewee	89 years	91 years

moved from Millers Point/Sirius Building were asked about their history in the area, perceptions of everyday life, their accommodation, social ties, the impact of the announcement that they would have to move, why they have decided to resist the move, the removal process and how they saw the future.

Interviewees were recruited with the assistance of the Redfern Legal Centre, the Millers Point Community Working Party, Friends of Millers Point and through word of mouth. Ethics permission was obtained through the Research & Innovation Office at the University of Technology Sydney. All of the names used are pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted between March and November 2016.

The Government's Narrative Justifying the Displacement of Millers Point and Sirius Building Tenants

On the day of the removal announcement the government launched a highly sophisticated campaign to disseminate a narrative that it hoped would convince the media and the public that the displacement was legitimate, humane and just. The rationale for removing the tenants and selling off the properties had four interrelated strands – high maintenance costs; the unsuitability of many properties; the high asset value and related relative rent subsidy and that the sales would release funds that would be used to build 1500 social housing dwellings.

Family and Community Services (FACS) presented the media with a media release from the minister responsible and a 16 page "media pack". The media release was headed, "High cost harbourside assets to be sold for a fairer social housing system". A central argument was that in the interests of fairness the public housing dwellings in Millers Point will be sold "with the proceeds to be reinvested into the social housing system across NSW" (Goward 2014). The media pack stated,

> The Government has determined due to the high cost of maintenance, the significant investment required to improve properties to modern social housing standards, and a high potential sales values, its assets in Millers Point will be sold over a two year period and public housing tenants relocated to more suitable accommodation (NSW Government 2014a).

In regard to maintenance the minister claimed that "maintenance on properties in Millers Point costs more than four times the average or public housing dwellings in NSW". She then went on to compare the "subsidies" public housing tenants received in Millers Point ($44,000 per annum), compared to $8,000 per year in Campbelltown, $7,000 in Gosford and $11, 000 in Wollongong (Goward 2014). The subsidies were calculated by comparing what the market rent would be and comparing it to the rent that residents were paying – 25% of their income.

Interrogating the Government's Narrative Justifying the Removal

If we interrogate each justification, it is clear that all are contestable and obscure a government approach driven by a deep neoliberal and instrumental rationality perspective. The government's justifications are reviewed in turn.

The High Cost of Maintenance

The argument that maintenance costs are relatively high for Millers Point properties fails to take into account the age of the dwellings and their heritage value. Many of the homes were built over a century ago. Amendments to the Heritage Act 1977 passed in 1999 made it mandatory for owners of heritage properties to "achieve minimum standards of maintenance and repair" (NSW Government 2016a). Noteworthy, is that almost all of the interviewees had a different narrative to the government on the question of maintenance. They were deeply sceptical of Housing NSW's claims about substantial maintenance expenditure and commented that historically their homes had been neglected and as a result had declined, sometimes significantly. Selma was a tenant in Millers Point for over a decade:

> It was in fairly good condition when I moved in there but I had some problems with leaking roofs and stuff which Housing [NSW] never came and fixed. The problems got worse and worse … When I left there the lounge room ceiling in one corner was a torrent of rain whenever it rained. There was mould all over the ceiling.

In 27 years, no work had been done on Paul's home:

> Now I've been in this particular apartment for 27 years and never had a lick of paint put on it. The carpet is 27 years old. So they've really done nothing and this is a common story with everyone.

There was a feeling that there had been a deliberate policy of neglect:

> Yeah, it was obvious they were never going to fix any of the properties … It wouldn't matter how many times we called them they wouldn't come and attend to anything … I don't know if it was purposely intended to demoralise us. I think it was their plan for a very long time that they were going to sell the buildings so there wasn't any point in fixing them up. (Selma)

Perhaps the key weakness of the government's argument in respect to the high cost of maintenance is its silence around the maintenance of the Sirius Building. Maintenance of the Sirius building is not mentioned in the Minister's media release or in the media pack (there is reference to problems with the basement and the dumping of cars) because it is not an issue. The age and concrete structure of the Sirius Building mean that the maintenance costs per unit are probably lower than many other public housing complexes. It is 35 years old whereas the average age of social housing properties in NSW is 45 years and "in good physical condition" (Dunn 2015).

"A Significant Investment is Required to Improve Properties to Modern Housing Standards"

Although there is no doubt that some of the homes are not ideal, especially for older people (steep terraces and stairs), there are plenty of properties within Millers Point that are appropriate and many interviewees said they "loved" their accommodation despite the government neglect.[6] Also, residents in unsuitable accommodation could have been moved to vacant apartments in the Sirius Building which is suitable for less able people. One of the remaining tenants in the Sirius Building is severely visually disabled but the design of the building allows her to manage.

The Much Higher "Rent Subsidy" in Millers Point

If the government were to rent out former public housing dwellings in Millers Point and the Sirius Building on the private rental market the median rent received would certainly be much higher than what could be obtained if a similar process occurred in Campbelltown located in Sydney's outer ring. However, FACS had no intention of embarking on this course of action so the argument is spurious. The minister's insinuation that taxpayers pay a high subsidy for Millers Point public housing tenants has been critiqued as seriously misleading. The Tenants Union of NSW commented,

> The Government's media release refers variously to subsidies "paid" and "funded by the NSW taxpayer", and "received by" tenants, all in dollar amounts. The truth is that not a dollar of money raised from taxpayers is paid to public housing tenants or otherwise credited to their rent accounts. Not one dollar. Tenants pay money to Housing NSW, not the other way around. The subsidies to which the Minister refers are accounting entries. (Martin 2014, p. 1)

"High Cost Harbourside Assets to be Sold for a Fairer Social Housing System"

The NSW government maintains that it is not legitimate that these expensive assets are occupied by public housing tenants and that selling them off would allow it to start addressing the waiting list for public housing. The government's argument raises a number of questions. The 1500 homes the government plans to build using funds from the sales in Millers Point and the Sirius Building represent less than 3% of the 60,000 households on the social housing waiting list, so it will have a nominal impact. Also, they are losing at least 543 tenancies[7] so the actual figure is closer to 1000 social housing dwellings or 1.7% of the waiting list.

At the beginning of December 2016, 133 Millers Point properties had been sold for $349 million – a median sale price of $2.39 million per dwelling (Mowbray 2016). If the current trend continues it is estimated that the sale will realise around $680 million, about $180 million more than the government's initial estimate of $500 million. This raises the question of why a proportion of this "cash bonanza" could not be used to enhance some of the "unsuitable" public housing properties in Millers Point and allow tenants who are extremely reluctant to leave, to remain and why the Sirius Building cannot be retained for public housing. The government has not divulged what it will do with the extra revenue.

The dominance of an approach informed by instrumental rationality means that financial considerations are the main driver. This was highlighted in stark fashion when the NSW Minister for the Environment rejected a recommendation by the NSW Heritage Council to have the Sirius Building heritage-listed. The rejection was premised on the argument that a heritage listing (a heritage listing would mean that the building cannot be demolished) would diminish the value of the building by $70 million:

> I am not [heritage] listing it because whatever its heritage value, even at its highest, that value is greatly outweighed by what would be a huge loss of extra funds from the sale of the site, funds the government intends to use to build housing for families in great need. (in Muller 2016)

The Removal Process

On the day of the announcement tenants were hand-delivered a letter signed by the Chief Executive of Family and Community Services (FACS), Housing NSW. The letter stated that all homes were to be sold "including the home you occupy". It went on to state,

> I want to assure you that we will help you to move to a new home and to also try and help reduce the stress involved in moving as much as we possibly can. (NSW Government 2014b)

Despite this assurance, many of the interviewees found the process intensely stressful. The process captures what Dillard and Ruchala (2005) labelled "administrative evil".

No Consultation, Shock and Awe from Day One

There was no prior consultation with tenants. News of the minister's announcement spread rapidly through the community. Residents were stunned. A Sirius Building tenant recalled the moment she heard the news:

> The day that we received the notice, apparently there was a press conference at 10.00am on the Cahill Expressway, it was 11.00am, I was listening to the radio and I heard it on the news and I nearly collapsed. I was devastated from then on. (Jocelyn)

The distress was accentuated by door-knocking and the distribution of letters by government personnel:

> They were all with this paper work coming to our doors, knocking on the doors … So it was horrific. The whole thing. It was just horrible. I was gut wrenched. And then they were right on us to get us out of there you know what I mean. (Peter)

The minister's statement that all of the houses would be sold and all of the residents would have to move regardless of age, longevity of residence or health status, was particularly distressing:

> Someone said that the Labor Party started it but they weren't so brutal. They waited till you moved out or you died before they started selling them off which was fine with everybody. Just to cleanse the whole community. It's terrible. (Adele)

> A real community and this is what kills me to think that it has been torn to pieces. To destroy this beautiful community where everyone cares, loves and respects one another and we come together in times of need always and it's just, I can't believe that it's happening in my life-time to live though a government like this … They're heartless, soulless. (Jocelyn)

The Specialist Relocation Officers and the "Housing Lotto"

Each tenant was allocated a "specialist relocation officer" to make the move "as easy as possible" (NSW Government 2014b). A tenant agreed that the relocation team was highly professional:

> Very professional I would say at what they were doing which was to get us out, but on the surface while they appeared to be very personable it was like a façade or something. You could see that they were just highly trained in what they were doing. (Selma)

Several interviewees found the interaction with their removal officer extremely stressful:

> Straightway I started to get calls from the relocation officer and I'm really glad I was [psychologically] strong then because I don't know how I would have taken it. Cos I just tried to avoid the calls. If it was private I wouldn't answer because it all seemed too much. It just seemed that they wanted people … just out. They were going to start to work on it and just everybody had to leave. (Esme)

A primary part of the removal process involved what Housing called My Property Choice and the tenants labeled the "housing lotto". An interviewee explained the "housing lotto":

> Every second Tuesday it was held in Sirius in the community room there and they came along, the housing people, and they'd have several places like maybe half a dozen places that had become available … somewhere around the city area and you sort of made a bid for them, like a ballot. You filled out a form and said, "Well, I'd like to be considered for that. So you might have had a dozen families but only one's going to get it and so they'd go and get a look at it and get their hopes up and then, "Sorry, you know. Someone else has got it". So that seemed like a strange way to go about it too … People were saying, "I'm not going to be part of this bloody housing lotto". (Harry)

Many tenants found My Property Choices stressful and divisive.

The Two "Formal Offers" and Threatened Termination of Public Housing Status

The most significant weapon in Housing NSW's armory, was the explicit threat that the public housing status of tenants would be terminated if they refused two "formal" offers of alternative housing from Housing NSW. Tenants were allowed a number of informal offers, but after a period of time were given formal offers. Tenants were allowed to appeal a formal offer through a body called the Housing Appeals Committee on the basis that the accommodation offered was unsuitable. However, there was no guarantee that the appeal would be successful. If it was successful, after a period there would be another formal offer.

Why Residents Decided to Move

Initially there was a good deal of resistance. There was a strong feeling that the displacement was unjust and must be fought. However, once it became evident that the government was absolutely determined and there was no possibility of a legal challenge, resistance started to crumble.

> We fought it at first you know. We thought this is terrible. They can't do this to us. Well actually, we don't own the houses. They've got you by the balls so to speak and we just faced the fact that we're going to have to move. (Harry)

Tenants moved for a range of interlinked reasons. Probably the key reason was feeling stressed, intimidated and fearful of what might happen if they refused to move. The primary fear was that their public housing status would be terminated. Once neighbours and friends started to move those remaining felt they had to follow suit. There was also a good deal of concern about their living conditions. The lack of maintenance meant that many tenants were living in difficult circumstances. The respective reasons are elaborated on below.

Fearful, Intimidated and Stressed

As mentioned, the key pressure on tenants was the fear of losing their public housing status. Almost all the tenants were dependent on government benefits for their income and they were acutely aware that having to depend on the private rental sector for their accommodation would be extremely

deleterious. The anxiety related to not knowing what will happen was profound and meant that many tenants were keen to move and have their situation resolved as soon as possible:

> Most of the time I just wanted it to be over cos it was just too [much] … I just felt so anxious. It was like well if you're going to move me just move me now, or tell me where I'm going to go because this is just, yeah it was unbearable. (Selma)

When asked whether it was difficult to withstand the pressure, Selma responded,

> Extremely [difficult]. Well you couldn't withstand it because it just felt like it was inevitable and so just either bring it on or tell me what you're going to do with me …

> I felt a bit like a puppet you know, "Like what are you going to do with me? What have you got planned for me?"

Beryl felt totally destabilised by the government's absolute determination to move the residents: "In the end I didn't want to be there [Millers Point]. They just made it feel like it [her home] wasn't mine anymore". She resisted moving for a substantial period. However, as the two-year deadline approached (March 2016), she succumbed to the pressure:

> I got the new relocation officer which was good and so you know cos that was December and we had to be out by March and I'm thinking they're threatening to terminate us [her public housing status] if we don't cooperate and you're thinking, "Well I can't really afford to live anywhere else besides Housing".

Initially Patrick had been determined to resist the displacement. However, after resisting for over a year his resolve collapsed. The pressure was simply too great:

> I continued the tenancy there until about what 18 months ago I suppose when I moved out. Pressure was put upon us by the government that if we didn't get out, we'd be offered two places and we'd have to take one of them. If we didn't, they'd just say, well you're going to the back of the [waiting]-list sort of thing. That's the way they was going to punish us sort of thing for not moving.

A Sense that Resistance was Futile

Over time resistance became more and more difficult. Residents felt that they had no choice as it became evident that the government was not prepared to budge. Harry was initially determined not to move but soon after the announcement he decided resistance was pointless:

> I wouldn't blame anyone wanting to get out. In our case … I mean we just saw the writing on the wall. We thought this is going to drag on and on … I went to Parliament House on the day of the announcement … and we sat in the Parliament and Alex Greenwich[8] … he stood up and you know made a few points on our behalf and all the Liberals[9] just walked out or just went on with reading their newspapers or whatever they were doing.

Once tenants started leaving, sustaining resistance became more difficult for the remaining tenants. After initially resisting, Melissa concluded that she had to move. Her decision was hastened by close friends moving, depression and anxiety about what would happen if she refused the offers:

> It was just too much and it wasn't the same anymore. Donna was the first one to go and then slowly people started to move out. Jim and Ray went and it was like I don't know, it was quite sad. I still feel sad thinking about it … The time was coming. The two-year deadline was coming and people were gone. The people that I felt closest too … My depression started to creep in and I said, "I can't take it anymore".

Mandy had been optimistic, but after several months she lost hope:

> Just the hope had gone … You know people were just getting tired and it seemed to me it goes always back to the one or two people you know that are doing all the work … I had no conscience about it [leaving] … I didn't have any cos I knew I had done my best and I could see the writing on the wall.

Moving Encouraged by the Poor Condition of Accommodation and/or Difficult Neighbours

As mentioned, a major factor that pushed people to leave was the poor condition of their homes due to inadequate maintenance. Although there is no conclusive evidence, the interviews strongly suggested that Housing NSW had little interest in adequate maintenance. Several interviewees told of how their requests for maintenance assistance were ignored or alternatively the "repairs" done were so shoddy,

the problem was never fixed or was resolved for a short period. In contrast, the alternative homes offered were generally pristine and difficult for residents to resist.

Leaks and mould were common issues. Selma felt that the mould in her apartment had had an impact on her health:

> I mean I got [public] Housing in the first place because at one stage in my life I was extremely ill and I was on the disability pension … and I'm very subject to allergies and things like that … I developed sleep apnea which is actually quite severe. And yeah, I can't, I don't have proof that it was the mould doing it but I know from my history and what I've been through medically in the past that it certainly would not have been helpful to me to be in that environment.

Neglect and the poor state of his home certainly hastened Patrick's move:

> They wouldn't fix the places. The places were a disgrace at the end of it. Rising damp and you know busted windows and they just wouldn't do nothing for you … You knew that they weren't going to do nothing for you … This is the way they were treating people to get them out.

He also had difficult neighbours: "And some of the people that they moved in there they just annoyed people badly you know. They're on drugs and everything else. They just drove you insane". It is likely that the placing of challenging tenants in Millers Point was not a purposeful tactic to encourage tenants to move, but rather a function of public housing in all areas being increasingly occupied by tenants with complex needs (see Morris 2015).

Discussion and Conclusions

The massive increase in land value in Millers Point and the Rocks was seized upon by the NSW government as an opportunity to amass at least a half billion dollars and create an enclave for the wealthy. The implications of the sell-off for the public housing tenants was given minimal consideration. Instead, every effort was made by government to hasten their departure and create a narrative that would portray the displacement as rational and just. There is no doubt that the displacement has been a traumatic event for many of the tenants. Especially for the older, established residents it has been intensely distressing.

What the study illustrates is how neoliberalism can encourage an approach by government dominated by instrumental rationality and administrative evil. Residents spoke about being treated like "commodities". A leader of the resistance to the removal captured the dominance of an instrumental rationality approach on the part of the NSW government:

> Yeah, and the way they look at it is, they don't look at us as people. We're looked on by the government as a commodity because they say, "Well, like what's going on here. We can get rid of these people. We'll find somewhere for them to live" … and then this is what they talk about all the time. The value of the property. The money side of it and no one seems to be worried about the human side of it – the human cost. (Paul)

The key justification for the removal was that the money raised would be used to build an additional 1500 social housing dwellings. Interviewees posed the obvious question – why is the building of public housing dependent on the sale of public housing in Millers Point and the Sirius Building? Should the building of social housing not be financed by general revenue? This question becomes more pertinent in light of the NSW government having a budget surplus of $3.4 billion in 2015–2016; it is expected to grow to $3.7 billion in 2016–2017. The surplus is mainly due to the property boom in Sydney since mid-2013. Revenue from stamp duty (stamp duty represents around 4% of the purchase price and is paid on every home sold), $8.9 billion in 2016–2017, is predicted to rise to $9.8 billion in 2019–2020 (Nicholls 2016).

In most global cities, gentrification has led to substantial displacement of low-income households (Slater 2009, Watt 2013). However, in the main, the people affected have been private renters. The mass removal of a whole suburb and apartment block and the selling off of the properties to wealthy individuals, does represent a significant escalation in the battle with public housing tenants in areas that over the years mainly due to cultural shifts (see Zukin 1987) have become highly sought after and expensive neighbourhoods.

In Sydney in suburbs that have experienced gentrification, public housing tenants are watching the events unfolding in Millers Point and the Sirius Building with much trepidation (see Hasham and Mckenny 2014, *The Daily Telegraph* 2014). The NSW government has drawn up plans to significantly redevelop Waterloo, a substantial public housing area in Sydney's inner ring, and has stated that no public housing tenant will be moved from the area in the process (NSW Government 2016b). However, after the Millers Point / Sirius Building displacements there is a good deal of skepticism as to whether the government will honour this guarantee (McKenny 2016). There is a realisation that the ascendency of an instrumental rationality perspective means that the mass displacement of public housing tenants to areas not of their choosing is an ever-present possibility.

Notes

1. The Coalition government is constituted by the Liberal Party and the National Party. The latter are a regional party.
2. 8 properties (16 tenancies) in Dawes Point were threatened and it is an extension of Millers Point.
3. The Green Bans were implemented by the Builder Labourers Federation from 1970. It involved union members refusing to work on developments it deemed guilty of demolishing historic buildings, the erosion of public space and unnecessary development (Burgmann and Burgmann 1998).
4. Public housing is administered by the housing authorities of the respective states and territories. Community housing are non-profit housing associations. Their housing stock is constituted mainly of public housing that has been handed over to community housing providers (CHPs). The CHPs, which are non-government organisations or religious organisations, are responsible for the allocation and management of these homes. Social housing refers to both public and community housing.
5. This was manifested perhaps most dramatically in the selling of the government owned telecommunications company, Telstra. There was an endeavor to boost the power and depth and breadth of the market and the private sector at every opportunity (see Connell 2006).
6. This is based on my own observations and interviews with present and ex-residents.
7. The 543 tenancies include tenancies vacated prior to the March 2014 announcement (see SGS Economics and Planning 2014, p. 3).
8. Alex Greenwich is an independent member in the State Parliament. Millers Point and the Sirius Building are in his constituency and he has fought extremely hard for the residents.
9. Although the ruling party is called the Liberal Party, it is a right of centre party.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

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