Home is where the Heart is: tenant movements in the US, the UK, and Australia

Report by Joel Dignam, Churchill Fellow

2019 Churchill Fellowship to learn how to best build an organisation to grow the power of renters to advocate for social change

Awarded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust



Winston Churchill Trust

Learn globally, inspire locally.

Acknowledgements
I'm very grateful to those who helped to make this whole journey possible for me. People have helped by assisting with my initial application many years ago, but also through assisting with establishing Better Renting, which gave me the grounding to apply and undertake this Fellowship in the first place. I'm also grateful to the friends who hosted me during my travels, helping to provide a home and a familiar accent during my weeks abroad. Thanks also to those who read an earlier version of this report and provided feedback. Most of all I'm grateful to the people who took the time to meet with me and share their insights. I hope this report can be as useful for them as researching and writing it has been for me.

Introduction
I applied for this Fellowship in 2019 interested in how to develop and sustain a tenant advocacy organisation in Australia. Due to Covid-19, I ended up travelling three years later, by which time the tenant organisation I had founded was somewhat more established. The scope of my enquiry evolved and while I remained interested in questions of organisational development and financial sustainability, I also delved into broader questions of movement strategy and the interrelationship of organisations — questions I've also been engaging with through my work in Australia.

I undertook this research as the Founding Director of Better Renting, a community of renters working together for stable, affordable, and healthy homes. Prior to founding Better Renting in 2018, I had mostly worked in organising and campaigning roles in the climate space, as well as stints in union organising and engaging with electoral politics. I have a deep interest in social movement theory and brought this to my Fellowship: some of what I've read (and written) on the subject is available at https://commonslibrary.org/by/joel-dignam.

I can be contacted by email on joel.dignam@gmail.com

Dissemination
I plan to share the lessons from my Fellowship firstly through my work. I can begin putting ideas into practice at Better Renting, but also share them with other organisations working on housing and tenancy issues. Through the media I also have the chance to share ideas more broadly, such as highlighting the normalcy of rent controls in NYC. I hope to do more writing for a broader audience to help some more of these ideas enter the mainstream. I also plan to engage directly with elected officials who have an interest in these issues to help them think about the challenges and the shifts that we might expect.

Keywords
Social movements, renters rights, tenant advocacy, commodification, housing

Indemnity clause
I understand that the Churchill Trust may publish this Report, either in hard copy or on the internet or both, and consent to such publication.

I indemnify the Churchill Trust against any loss, costs or damages it may suffer arising out of any claim or proceedings made against the Trust in respect of or arising out of the publication of any Report Submitted to the Trust and which the Trust places on a website for access over the internet.

I also warrant that my Final Report is original and does not infringe the copyright of any person, or contain anything which is, or the incorporation of which into the Final Report is, actionable for defamation, a breach of any privacy law or obligation, breach of confidence, contempt of court, passing-off or contravention of any other private right or of any law.

Signed: Joel Dignam
Date: 8 December 2022

Contents

1. Report overview 6
2. Key concepts 8
   2.1 The faces of power 8
   2.2 Organisations as 'interfaces' 9
   2.3 The four roles within social movements 10
      2.3.1 The role of the citizen 10
      2.3.2 The role of the social change agent 10
      2.3.3 The role of the reformer 10
      2.3.4 The role of the rebel 11
   2.4 Summary of key concepts 11
3. Organisational models 12
   3.1 From grassroots to NGOs 12
   3.2 Key differences: scale, financial base, power base 12

Case study: the fight against unfair evictions in the UK 16

4. Key trends 17
   4.1 The going has got tough, and the tough have got going 17
      4.1.1 Renters are getting more active 17
      4.1.2 Renters are having more effect 18
      4.1.3 What has changed? 19
   4.2 The real estate industry is a powerful and relentless opponent 22
   4.3 Corporatisation of both smaller and larger landlords 23
5. Implications and recommendations 26
   5.1 We need a different cultural conversation around housing 26
      5.1.1 Dismantling opponent narratives 26
      5.1.2 Developing and strengthening our own narratives 27
      5.1.3 Supporting renters as messengers and spokespeople 27
   5.2 We need to build the grassroots power of tenants 28
      5.2.1 Why power-building matters 28
      5.2.2 Connect micro services with macro impact 30
   5.3 We need a diverse ecosystem of tenant organisations 32
      5.3.1 The different roles organisations can play 32
      5.3.2 Power in coalition 35
      5.3.3 The role of funders 36

Case study: Housing justice in New York 38

6. What else? 39
6.1 How to design good rental laws? 39
6.2 How climate change is affecting renters 40
6.3 Race, colonisation, and housing 40
7. Conclusion 41
Bibliography 42
Appendix 1: Itinerary 46

1. Report overview

From 27 August to 2 October 2022, I travelled through the US and the UK meeting with people working on tenancy issues. This included people working in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, New York, London, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Manchester. The people I spoke with often worked, paid or unpaid, in tenancy NGOs or autonomous tenant unions, but I also spoke with people involved in funding organisations or community unions that had chosen housing from a variety of possible issues to work on. The course of each interview varied depending on the individual, but I generally tried to explore questions of power-building, the significance of narrative, and how the movement 'ecosystem' worked in each area. Some interviewees would also point me to organisational ephemera or published works. A full list of interviewees and their organisations is at Appendix 1.

I came to this work after founding Better Renting, a tenant advocacy organisation, five years ago. Better Renting is a community of renters working together for stable, affordable, and healthy homes.[1] We work across Australia, with an approach that involves campaigning for policy reform, building communities of renters, and aiming to change the culture around renting, particularly through media engagement. Our work has mostly been around the energy performance of rental properties, with other priorities being security of tenure (ending unfair evictions) and promoting rental affordability.

I was able to learn a lot through the conversations I had, but my approach had limitations. Some respondents may not have been fully honest with me when, for example, reflecting on the weaknesses of their own organisation, or offering criticism of others they work with in collaboration. Even when people want to be honest, we all have our blind spots. People who dislike their employer are unlikely to remain there for long: survivorship bias means I was more likely to interview people who had a favourable view of their organisation. To counter this, wherever possible I sought out multiple perspectives on the same issues and invited disconfirmation of my developing hypotheses. My interview notes became just one input that I combined with other published perspectives and my own analysis.

As my research progressed, I began to synthesise themes and probe these further in subsequent interviews. This eventually coalesced into six key points, which form the substance of this report. The first three points are regarding the current state of play:

1. Renters are building power in response to worsening conditions
2. Landlords and the real estate industry are constantly trying to undo past renter victories
3. Corporate landlords are more and more common.

The next three points reflect on the implications of the above for what tenant movements should do in the future, particularly in Australia. I recommend:

1. Investing in narrative work
2. Building a grassroots power-base
3. Supporting a diverse and co-ordinated movement ecosystem.

The main audience for the report is others like me: people with a deep interest in rental issues who want to learn how we can achieve better outcomes in this space. But I hope this report may also be interesting and relevant for more of a lay audience, perhaps renters, seeking a broader way of understanding our shared situation and what we might do about it. Another potential audience is social movement scholars who may not be particularly interested in housing justice, but may still appreciate the analysis of social movement dynamics.

This report opens by exploring some frameworks that resonated with the ideas and issues raised in my conversations. These concepts cover the different types of power, the utility of connecting separated resources or agents, and the different ways of contributing to a social movement. I will then outline the different sorts of organisations I came across and the ways in which they vary or are similar. This is intended to provide a taxonomy of sorts that can help us to understand the existing landscape, or to think about what niches might exist in the movement ecosystem for a new organisation.

This report grew out of a bunch of conversations. I see it as a continuation, not the end, of those conversations. I hope it can be a resource for others as passionate as I am about improving conditions for renters and that it can be a useful step on the ongoing journey of learning how we can do this essential work more effectively.

2. Key concepts

Conversations during my travels kept bringing me back to the same ideas. This section offers an overview of three conceptual frameworks that can help us to understand social change in general, and which are particularly relevant for the later discussion of tenant movements in this report. The frameworks are:

- The multiple dimensions of power
- Organisations as interfaces
- The four roles of social movements.

2.1 The faces of power

In *Power: a Radical View*[2], Steven Lukes develops a model for understanding power that can help us to understand the work of tenant movements through time.

Lukes' model involves a multi-faceted understanding of power. The obvious face of power, Lukes argues, is specific, observable outcomes and behaviours: tenants have power if the Rent Guidelines Board freezes rents; lessors have power if the Board agrees to an 8% rent increase. The concern is about concrete decisions on public issues where there is a clear public conflict. Another theorist, Heywood, characterises this as "power as decision-making".[3]

The second face is "power as agenda setting"[3]: determining what issues get to be debated. Some demands for change are silenced, thwarted, or 'buried in committee': never allowed to get to a point where a specific observable decision is made. The clear risk of eviction means that many tenants avoid making requests that they are legally entitled to make. Here landlords have power – although its presence is less transparent – because they are getting tenants to do what they want, even if the conflict isn't explicit. This model, suggested by Bachrach and Baratz[4], takes into account the power to prevent decisions being made on potential issues.

But Lukes feels that this two-dimensional view fails to heed the power to prevent people from conceptualising grievances in the first place. This third face of power is the power to influence someone's expectations such that they unconsciously accept the status quo. This is "power as thought control".[3] "A may exercise power over B by getting him [sic] to do what he does not want to do," notes Lukes, **"but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants."** (emphasis added). Where tenants are aware of an injustice but decide against taking action, they are subject to the second sort of power. Where tenants don't even feel the presence of an injustice – when they take a freezing apartment to be normal, or they don't even question the legitimacy of a rent increase – we can suggest that they are subject to this third sort of power.

Murray Edelman explores a similar idea in *Politics as Symbolic Action.* He argues we should understand political announcements not merely as the *outcomes* of public sentiment, but as the *inputs* that shape public cognition. The effect of political action may be to change *objective conditions*, but the effect is also to change *subjective conditions* "by changing the

demands and the expectations." Edelman argues that the subjective sense of whether one is deprived depends on social cues about what one ought to expect more so than on actual conditions. The same conditions are more offensive to — and more likely to arouse action from — those who expect better.

Thinking about power in this way is fundamental and will help us to better understand the work being done by tenant advocates. "Power as thought control" determines the long-term direction of change: what changes will be pursued and what, once won, will be protected. As such, while advocates do contest power in other ways, such as eviction defence or supporting a rent strike, we can also think about contesting the third face of power: striving to posit an alternative world governed by different values. When someone talks about a world without evictions, or a rental sector without private landlords, they aren't trying to change outcomes now: they are trying to reshape what we expect and are willing to fight for.

2.2 Organisations as 'interfaces'

Multiple times through my research I was reminded of the idea of an 'interface'. This is an idea I use to understand the work of Better Renting; it also came in handy to understand what other organisations do. Here I will explore this idea and show how it can help illuminate the role of social movement organisations.

An interface is a means to make the (often esoteric) internal language of a system intelligible to users outside that system. A prosaic example is a button in a fridge that controls the temperature: the button communications in terms of what the user wants (a cooler fridge) rather than in terms of how the system operates (more compressor activity, greater channelling of airflow from the freezer compartment).[5] Similarly, a tenancy lawyer is an interface between an individual tenant and the legal system. From the lawyer example, we can see that an interface can be bi-directional: not only is the lawyer making the legal system intelligible for the tenant, they can make the tenant's issues intelligible to the legal system. For example, the lawyer may translate "my landlord is turning up uninvited" into the appropriate legalese: "the landlord is violating the tenant's quiet enjoyment". An interface adds value not just by providing a service directly, but also by providing a better way of interacting with another service or system.

I saw this in operation everywhere I went. Churches United For Fair Housing is not an affordable housing provider, but they help people in their community navigate the bureaucracy to put in an application for the housing lottery.[6] Citizens Wales supports communities to interface with the machinery of government by helping them to understand who can make decisions and how to reach them. A bi-directional interface, Citizens also helps government to interface with community for example by running a listening process, getting community members into the room, and inviting council workers along. In NYC, JustFix offers an interface to engage with publicly available but unintelligible raw data, helping tenants to research the rent history of their building or organisers to see the portfolio holdings of individual landlords.[7]

Arguably all organisations act as an interface to some extent. However, where an organisation is *mostly* an interface, this model enables us to understand the value that they

add. In addition to or instead of direct power-building work, an organisation can offer benefits to individual renters or the campaigning ecosystem more broadly by providing interface functions.

2.3 The four roles within social movements

In my travels I came across organisations playing different but complementary roles in social movements. This phenomenon is explored by Bill Moyer in *Doing Democracy*[8] with a typology of different social movement roles:

- The citizen,
- The social change agent,
- The reformer, &
- The rebel.

Below I'll summarise Moyer's points about each role and my observations of these roles in the tenancy space.

2.3.1 The role of the citizen

Citizens have a critical role to play. They demonstrate that your movement is made up of relatable people who have shared values with broader society. They make sure you are part of 'us', not them. They talk to their friends, neighbours, hairdressers about the issue, helping to create a broad base for social change. Citizens typically participant in the tenant movement by being an active member of a tenant association or tenant union, participating alongside their neighbours and as part of their community (these models are discussed below). Citizens may also participate informally simply by turning up to events or through *ad hoc* self-directed advocacy on rental issues.

2.3.2 The role of the social change agent

Most of the people I spoke with were campaigners aiming to achieve political impact through a variety of means, including the organising work of supporting and expanding citizen participation. These are "social change agents". Such actors will convene coalitions, develop and implement strategies, put on a stunt in front of city hall, organise people on the ground. In some sense they are an interface between the citizens and the political establishment. Amongst other activities, they help to educate and agitate citizens to take action.

2.3.3 The role of the reformer

If social change agents are an interface between citizens and the polity, then reformers tend to act as the interface between the polity and the movement itself. These are the establishment organisations that broker the passage of legislation — perhaps even drafting it. They often have the knowledge and resources to use existing institutions like parliaments, corporations, or courts of law, to help prosecute their shared agenda. When this role works well, it works in tandem with the others to help secure and maintain gains. When it is ineffective, the lure of access to elite power leads to accommodationist victories indistinguishable from defeats.

2.3.4 The role of the rebel

Rebels are the protestors and disruptors confronting injustice head-on. They help to puncture comfortable silences to force an issue on to society's agenda. These are the people doing eviction defence, protesting outside realtor's offices, or supporting a rent strike. Rebels play a critical role in highlighting a violation of shared values, particularly at the early stages of a movement. While polarisation is often an important part of creating social change, rebels can be ineffective when they allow themselves to be marginalised as an outgroup.

2.4 Summary of key concepts

We can better understand the work of tenant movements by thinking about power in terms of its different faces: decision-making, agenda-setting, and thought control. We can also think about the different functions and roles of tenant organisations, whether it's acting as an interface or playing one of the four roles described by Moyer: citizen, social change agent, reformer, or rebel.

In the next section of this report I move from theory towards practice, examining different organisational approaches I observed in my studies.

3. Organisational models

In my travels I came across a wide array of organisational approaches. Each organisation used a melange of methods reflecting their unique circumstances, the vision and skills of personnel past and present, and a degree of path dependency — people tend to keep doing what they've been doing before. What follows is an attempt to describe some of the axes on which organisations varied. This can help us to understand how organisations differ from one another and may also be useful for someone starting an organisation to think about what its approach would be.

3.1 From grassroots to NGOs

One consideration is how 'grassroots' versus 'NGO' an organisation was. This isn't a binary state. Rather, it's more like a spectrum with subtle gradations. At one end of this spectrum were groups made up entirely of volunteers, typically renters themselves, funded through member dues and working directly with renters to build collective power on the ground. Broadly, groups like these are "autonomous tenant unions" (ATUs).

But the lines around this categorisation are fuzzy; it's more of a spectrum. ATUs don't necessarily limit themselves to grassroots organising: some might also engage in more classic 'NGO' tactics like media engagement or political lobbying. In other cases, grassroots groups are in fact supported and enabled by an NGO. This seems to be true for some tenant associations which are initially established by NGO staff. And we have community unions like ACORN, Citizens Wales, or Living Rent Scotland which build power at a grassroots scale but have professional staff and national infrastructure. In all, this seems positive: rather than insist upon a fixed identity, groups show a capacity to adapt their approach based upon their analysis of what will be most effective.

Towards the other end of the spectrum we have NGOs. What distinguishes these groups isn't just that they are non-government organisations. It's more a model of having a greater dependence on external funding from government and/or philanthropy. These greater funds allow a larger paid staff. This reduces the reliance on volunteers, although paid staff can also enable greater and more dedicated organising efforts. NGOs may tend to be less like 'rebels' and more like 'reformers', including being inclined to work for change within existing systems. They will use a range of tactics and actions like surveys, petitions, reports, media engagement, political lobbying, and mobilising their supporters to direct pressure at decision-makers.

A final type of group I think of as the 'specialist organisations'. They may be structurally similar to NGOs (and may in fact *be* NGOs) but functionally they play a single specialised role instead of a broader 'campaigning' function. These groups don't necessarily campaign directly but add to the efficacy of other groups.

3.2 Key differences: scale, financial base, power base

The above discussion helps to draw out some of the differences between groups. Another difference is geographic scale, which can range from an individual neighbourhood up to the

level of the nation: Crown Heights Tenants Union is based in the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Crown Heights; Tenants Together works on rental issues throughout California; ACORN UK operates across the United Kingdom. Scale depends on organisational mission but also the external context: in Australia, tenancy legislation operates at the state/territory level, so there are fewer opportunities or justifications for national policy interventions.

Another area of differentiation is funding model. Generally, groups draw upon three funding sources in different proportions:

- member dues
- government funding
- philanthropy.

Many NGOs described having a roughly even blend of these three sources. Grassroots groups were less likely to have government funding and generally aimed for a high proportion of funding from member dues. In practice however, most still depended upon philanthropy.

On funding, I noticed that nobody I spoke with described a funding stream of supporters engaging in ‘regular giving’. This is unusual given how common the practice is in Australia. While “member dues” is similar in many ways, the key difference is that the members are paying to be part of a group exercising shared solidarity, as opposed to donating to support work by others that they are not part of. Conceptually, members of Living Rent Scotland are not donating so someone else can do the work, they are contributing resources towards a collective effort of which they are part. Such resources might go towards things like t-shirts, or props for an action, as well as staff salaries.

Groups also wield different forms of power. Grassroots groups may not have the name recognition or internal policy expertise of other groups, but they can have their own legitimacy. Portland Tenants United is an ATU from Portland, Oregon, that organises renters to build collective power: working directly with tenants enables a group like this to be a trusted authority on what renters are facing and a respected voice on how decision-makers should respond. This is aided by longevity — simply being around over time — which allows time for trust and relationships to develop. And it doesn’t hurt when a group has an engaged volunteer base to demonstrate political power.

NGO groups can tap into some of these same sources of power. In addition, professional expertise in-house is another source of authority when it comes to issues around research, data, and policy. NGOs may also have improved access to and relationships with decision-makers. They can also demonstrate political power by influencing the media and public conversation; this is also available to grassroots groups.

What then are the strengths and weaknesses of these different approaches?

Grassroots groups and ATUs have power that is independent of funders or of decision-makers, rooted in communities. This gives them an authenticity and a moral authority. “I’m a staff member so politicians lie to me all the time", one person told me — but the same

politicians would hesitate to lie to a member. *Our Rights! Our Power!,* a documentary about the successful campaign for Right to Counsel in NYC, demonstrates this powerfully, with the voices and passion of grassroots renters central to success.[9] These groups can contribute usefully to the rebel role described earlier.

But a big weakness for these groups is resources. These groups may have limited capacity, making it harder for them to seize opportunities or engage in larger, longer-term, or more complex campaign battles. They may also be dependent on massive contributions of volunteer labour from a rather small core of individuals who have the economic position that enables such a contribution. Ironically, these resource constraints can make it harder to organise at scale or be deliberate about creating a diverse, tenant-led movement.

NGOs, despite their shortcomings, do at least tend to have resources. And there's a lot to be said for this. Having dedicated paid staff means you can put more time in, like having an employee door-knocking for 20 hours a week to start a local ACORN group in a target electorate, or someone whose sole job is supporting a state-wide collaboration, or a researcher focusing exclusively on finding new data and turning it into a narrative-shifting report. These things are all theoretically possible in volunteer-based groups, but in reality there are constraints.

While NGOs can have many weaknesses, the greatest weakness I observed was a dependence on funders. There are various downsides to this:

- **if external funding runs out, a project may have to end prematurely.** One employee told me how they had had to pull out of organising in certain communities due to a changed funding situation, and they were grateful to see a grassroots group step into the void and continue supporting nascent power-building efforts.
- **funders can harmfully influence priorities and tactics.** Funders may deliberately seek to influence the groups they fund but even if they don't, the impact here can be implicit and even unintended. The need to secure funding can drive groups to undertake campaigns they wouldn't otherwise have prioritised, or to avoid tactics or strategies despite a belief in their effectiveness. Funding from governments or organisations that are themselves landlords is particularly risky here.
- **lack of accountability to grassroots renters.** If your money comes from funders, you become accountable to them. This risks a detachment from the communities that you are meant to serve. Groups with a greater dependence on member dues make themselves structurally accountable to their supporters. This means their work is more likely to align with the needs and preferences of people who rent.

These downsides are not necessarily intrinsic, nor insurmountable. Arguably, funders should be doing a better job of considering the harms they can create and looking at better ways to support the work of tenant organisations, including grassroots groups. I return to these point later in this report, when I discuss the role of funders in effective movements.

There are many ways in which tenant organisations differ: from where they operate, how they fund their work, and how they derive their power. Another axis of variation is the

difference between grassroots and NGO approaches, each of which has strengths and weaknesses.

Having now discussed the variety of organisations I came across in my tour, I now turn to the landscape facing these organisations and my observations about key current phenomena.

Case study: the fight against unfair evictions in the UK

In 2018, Generation Rent began leading a campaign to end unfair evictions in the UK. While Section 8 of the UK *Housing Act 1988* covers 'at fault' terminations, Section 21 allows a landlord to terminate a tenancy without having to provide any reason. The campaign initially involved a small coalition including Generation Rent, ACORN, London Renters Union, and the New Economics Foundation. Some larger organisations declined to get involved, considering the ask too unrealistic.

Yet the campaign quickly achieved striking success. In April 2019, less than 12 months after the collaboration had launched, the UK Government announced an end to unfair evictions. "Everyone renting in the private sector has the right to feel secure in their home," said then Conservative party Prime Minister Theresa May. Echoing the language of the campaign, she went on to affirm: "we're acting by preventing these unfair evictions."[10]

Just over a month later, May announced her resignation. Three years later, and the Conservative government is yet to turn these words into actions. Over those three years the initial coalition has grown into the Renters Reform Coalition, comprising 20 organisations.[11] Most recently, the Conservatives under Liz Truss apparently cooked up plans to shelve their commitment to reform — only to re-commit barely 24 hours later.[12] In the meanwhile, renters continue to get evicted through no fault of their own.

As I spoke with organisers across the UK, this unfulfilled promise stayed in my mind. The initial commitment from the government tells us something about what tenant advocates are capable of. On the other hand, the slow progress since then indicates the power of inertia and, perhaps more so, the power of opponents. It makes sense to ask two questions: why did the government make that initial commitment? But also – why hasn't more happened since?

It seems a few factors combined to get that initial commitment. May was a relatively progressive leader in the dying days of her Premiership with little to lose and an awareness of her legacy. Her housing advisor was Toby Lloyd, a former employee of national housing organisation Shelter, which could only help.[13] And with an election fast approaching, the Tories perhaps felt a need to appeal to a growing constituency of private renters (and maybe even their Tory-voting parents). At the same time, Generation Rent had been pro-active. They and their partners helped to shape the narrative around unfair evictions, building demonstrable support for action on this issue.[14] While campaigners work within the parameters of what is possible, as we can see here, they also affect those parameters.

But why hasn't more happened? The period since 2019 has been a tricky time to get anything done in the UK. Brexit and Covid-19 bedevilled the last three years, and with the recent death of the Queen and two changes in party leadership since then, it seems less and less likely that change will happen before the next election.

But it is true that the UK tenant movement simply hasn't built enough power to force action on this issue. Access to elites and having the right staffers is one thing. The independent power to compel a response is another. As one person said to me: do you think Mick Lynch [General Secretary of the UK Rail union] cares who the PM is? It may also be that it's harder to maintain unity with a national coalition; unresolved internal debates between focusing on unfair evictions versus an expansion into advocacy for rent control would not have helped with keeping a shared focus.

Challenges like this are inevitable for those seeking to effect change. The successes and setbacks of the UK tenant movement, as exemplified by the campaigning around unfair evictions, help to demonstrate how movement actors may rise or fall. The UK experience in particular highlights the significance of uncertainty, and how unanticipated forces can change what's possible. But it also highlights the value of planning: in addition to seizing the moment, also acting over time to shape what the future holds.

4. Key trends

I formulated three key observations about the current context in which tenant movement organisations are operating:

- In the face of worse conditions, tenants are getting more active and winning victories
- Opponents are maintaining fierce resistance
- Corporate landlords are becoming more common.

In this section I will discuss these three trends in turn.

4.1 The going has got tough, and the tough have got going

A striking observation from my travels is that renters are organising with a new urgency and with increased effectiveness. I attribute this to a few related trends:

- worse material conditions prompt people to campaign for change
- more middle-class people, locked out of ownership, add to the strength of the tenant movement, a process I term 'rentrification'
- renting issues become more salient in public discourse, with renting less stigmatised and renters more likely to be treated sympathetically.

In this section I will first discuss the evidence for an increase in activity and an increase in effectiveness, afterwards exploring the possible causes behind this.

4.1.1 Renters are getting more active

While the strength of tenant movements may wax and wane over time, at the current moment the trend seems to be in a positive direction: one person I spoke with estimated that 80% of current US tenant groups formed in the last five years. Indeed, many of the organisations I met with had come into existence only in the last decade or so, with the 2007-8 financial crisis apparently a catalyst, both for its impact on ownership (e.g. foreclosures and corporate purchasing of single-family homes) and its impact on public policy (e.g. austerity in the UK). Generally these newer groups have a more disruptive approach to change and less patience for existing institutions and processes, with militant tactics being more common. There is a similar pattern in Australia: since I founded Better Renting in 2018, the Renters and Housing Union and South-East Queensland Union of Renters have begun in Melbourne and Brisbane. In the US, the UK, and Australia, new organisations are springing up to push for action on rental issues.

In addition to new organisations, older organisations are also changing their approaches. This shift seems to be away from working with incumbent decision-makers within existing parameters towards seeking to build people power outside the system and shift the parameters of what is politically possible. Community organising is a common theme here. Although the practice is certainly not new, and people use the terminology loosely, various respondents in established organisations described internal shifts towards this approach. Shelter UK, for example, began an organising programme in 2018, and Housing Rights Committee San Francisco began focusing on organising from around 2012. Funders are also part of this landscape and similar changes may be underway in that community: the UK's Civic Power Fund, established in 2021, explicitly focuses on grassroots community organising. Alongside the growth of new organisations, the increase in tenant activity can be observed in established organisations adopting strategies that place more emphasis on working directly with renters and supporting grassroots participation and empowerment.

4.1.2 Renters are having more effect

Not only are there more tenant organisations that are taking more action: these efforts are bearing fruit. Across many different contexts, the upsurge in renter campaigning is winning improved outcomes for renters — albeit against a backdrop of worse material conditions.

These victories include:

- In San Francisco, legislation has granted more power to tenant associations, requiring lessors to negotiate with them[15]
- In New York State, the 2019 Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act improved conditions for rent-regulated tenants.[16] In New York City, 2017 right to counsel legislation funds legal support for tenants facing eviction[17]
- In Scotland, the government recently committed to a temporary rent freeze[18]
- Other jurisdictions across the USA are introducing rent stabilisation measures or developing the legislative means to do so[19–22]
- In Los Angeles, tenant organisations have won action on tenant buyouts, affordable housing, evictions, and short term rental accommodation[23]
- In Kansas City, KC Tenants, founded in 2019, was instrumental in winning a new right to counsel[24]
- During the Covid pandemic, tenants across the USA were able to secure eviction moratoria[25] and $25 billion in federal funding to address rental arrears[26].

Of course, there have been setbacks too. Notably the UK Government is showing no urgency when it comes to ending no fault evictions. The tenant movement in New York was unsuccessful with a push to cancel Covid-related rental arrears and has also been unable to secure passage of a good cause evictions bill, despite efforts[27]. California tenants have failed on multiple occasions to repeal the *Costa-Hawkins Act*, which limits rent controls. But these events are nonetheless consistent with the overall picture of a tenant movement that, while not all-powerful, is able to achieve new victories that proved elusive in the recent past.

In Australia we see a similar trend. Over the last few years, various jurisdictional governments have amended existing tenancy legislation to strengthen rights and protections for renters.[28] Tenants have secured stronger rights to have pets, to make minor

modifications, and to have more secure tenancies. In addition, Covid saw a raft of protections against eviction and rent increases, although this response was patchy across the country and had many deficiencies.[29] The experience in Australia is consistent with observations from overseas, suggesting a tenant movement whose growing power is reflected in legislative victories.

4.1.3 What has changed?

Why then, is this happening? We can attribute greater effectiveness to the fact that new organisations are forming, and existing organisations are acting more impactfully, creating a more powerful movement. But this didn't just 'happen to happen'. What has changed?

People organise when they have to

When I pushed interviewees on the *why* behind these shifts, the most common response was that people got active because things were getting worse. When you can afford rent and your property is maintained you are less likely to join a rent-strike or start a tenant association. In contrast, worse housing conditions force people to think more about their housing and yearn for a change. This can prompt spontaneous action or create fertile conditions for organising by outsiders. Across the US, UK, and Australia, more people are getting active on rental issues simply because more people are being harmed by the current housing system.

But what I also heard is that it's not just that *housing* conditions are getting worse. Various people described how an upsetting outcome in broader economic or political conditions prompted social movement activity, pointing to things like the election of Trump in 2016, the UK's austerity politics post-GFC, or the result of the Scottish independence referendum. An adverse outcome at the grand scale might push people to seek out agency and impact at the neighbourhood scale. Or, even on an unsuccessful campaign, people can develop skills and form connections that enable them to do other organising work.

'Rentrification': the gentrification of the renter class

Relatedly, the current housing system has made it harder for people to become owners. This means that there are more middle-class people trapped into renting who, if born in a past generation, would have been owner-occupiers by now.[30] As David Madden notes, housing crisis is the norm for working-class and poor communities.[31] What is different now is that the crisis is becoming a middle-class concern.

How can this lead to a stronger movement? Middle-class renters have various resources that they can bring to bear on the tenant side of the fight. Not only do they have more money, middle-class renters may also have more time available to contribute, or secure or flexible employment that makes it easier to volunteer (as noted earlier, volunteer movements can end up dependent on core activists with surplus resources). Social capital is also significant here: middle-class renters are more likely to have connections with journalists, political staffers, and other influential figures or decision-makers. Indeed, it's also true that political staffers *et cetera* are now themselves more likely to be renters, helping to create a more sympathetic political environment.

I am not alone in suggesting this phenomenon (although I would like to claim credit for giving it a catchy name). From New York State, Cea Weaver, Campaign Coordinator for Housing Justice for All, observes that "the number of people who are motivated to fight for strong rental housing policy is growing", and that while renters' rights have always mattered for working-class people and people of colour, "the new crop of tenant activists is younger, and while still multiracial, it is whiter than the previous generation."[32] In Denmark, Claus Højte, head of Copenhagen's tenant union, reflects that a campaign against a corporate landlord succeeded because it activated the self-interest of the middle classes: "when something starts affecting the middle classes, something political happens."[33]

Changing economic conditions have changed demographic patterns, creating an alignment of interests between middle-class people who hitherto could have accessed ownership and working-class people for whom renting and insecure housing has long been a norm. This creates the opportunity to create a shared identity – "tenants as a class"[24] – and use this to push for reforms that will benefit all people making their homes in the rental sector.

You can't ignore renters anymore

These two factors – worse conditions and 'rentrification' – sit alongside the sheer fact that there are more renters.[34] The most important outcome of this is its impact on the public discourse, with renting becoming normalised, rental issues given more attention, and renters less likely to be stigmatised.

When there are more renters and more middle-class renters this affects how rental issues are treated by the media. More coverage and more positive coverage creates a virtuous cycle: not only does it mean more journalists and outlets covering rental stories, it also means more renters fired up and ready to contribute to such stories. This is a spiral of self-reinforcing de-stigmatisation that moves rental issues from the margin to the mainstream. It's much more common nowadays for a story about increasing house prices or rents to focus on the victims or losers of this trend, in contrast with the exuberant tone that previously characterised such coverage.

This, of course, also changes politics. Canny politicians perceive that renters are a growing constituency with more political power. Not only that: a changed public discourse means decision-makers are more likely to hear about renting issues, including hearing from renters directly. It creates space and opportunity for politicians to call for or support changes that previously might have been cast as radical: in New York, the passage of the *Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act* followed an election in which insurgents beat beat conservative incumbent Democrats in primary contests (some having refused developer donations[35]), before the Democrats went on to win a stronger majority in the state senate. Even less sympathetic politicians are under more pressure to at least nod to renters' concerns, as we might observe from the UK Conservative party's stated intention to end no-fault terminations. More pollsters and commentators are pointing to renters as a growing political force.[36–38]

In short, having renting issues getting worse, affecting more people, and affecting more middle-class people means that the issue is no longer a niche concern. Instead it is a bread-and-butter issue that politicians and the media cannot afford to ignore. This destigmatises renters and renting, creating more political appetite and opportunity for action.

4.2 The real estate industry is a powerful and relentless opponent

A second trend I observed was the power of the real estate industry: how hard it will fight to prevent progress and how furiously it will seek to dismantle existing protections. Australia is seeing opponents of reform become more organised and aggressive, and we should expect this to worsen if tenant organisations enjoy further success at improving housing conditions for people who rent.

In the US and the UK, real estate interests offer powerful and organised resistance to change. Although power has always sought to maintain and expand its power, the relatively recent explosive growth in land values has increased the power and resources of these interests, and their commitment to maintain the status quo. In places like San Francisco and New York, where tenant protections are stronger, these forces are actively trying to wind back renters' rights. In the UK and Australia these efforts are less evident (likely because there is less to wind back). But we must heed the power of these opponents, think about how to counter them, and be alert to their constant work to worsen the status quo.

The path of tenancy reform is not a long arc bending inevitably towards justice. While things sometimes get better, such advances can provoke backlash. It is perhaps less like climbing a mountain, making plodding progress towards a summit, and more like a tug-of-war against a determined opponent. History offers many examples of renters' rights moving in the wrong direction: California's 1995 Costa-Hawkins Act, which makes it difficult to implement effective rent controls, was a reaction to earlier success at protecting tenants from rent increases. In the UK, people who rented enjoyed secure tenancy until Thatcher's 1988 Housing Act introduced the "assured shorthold tenancy", pushing private renters into precarity and facilitating the growth of an exploitative private rental sector alongside the diminution of council housing. It's true that "power concedes nothing without a demand"[39] — power is also very determined to win what it can for itself and to push back on past victories.

What is the power that these interests have? Firstly, they have vast financial resources. In both California and New York State[32], real estate interests are major donors to Democrats and Republicans, helping to keep legislators in line and stymie opposition. (This could be understood as the second face of power: not content just to win votes in the parliament, these interests must prevent issues from even being debated.) While power allows opponents to directly purchase the support of decision-makers, donations also perform a signalling role, demonstrating that the donor has the capacity to take more drastic action, such as spending on election advertising. (The idea of signalling in social change contexts is discussed by Zeynep Tufekci in her book *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest.*[40])

Another dimension of opponents' power is their claim to moral authority. The trope of the 'mum and dad' (or 'mom and pop') investor is alive and well across the Anglosphere, trotted out readily even by global corporations. This trope does two things. Firstly, it implies that economic success is demonstrative of moral virtue, the outcome of hard work and the virtues associated with it.[41] Thus, the wealth of property investors is evidence that they are worthy of esteem and above reproach. Secondly, it is an attempt to position property investors as like

'us'. In Australia at least, property investors have more wealth and higher incomes, yet the fact that they have produced offspring is apparently evidence that they are a relatable 'everyman'.[42] While this trope is used somewhat disingenuously by corporate landlords, it is further strengthened by the distributed activity of small-scale investors, some of whom, it is true, have children. In the UK much organised opposition comes from the 'National Rental Landlords Association', composed of private landlords. This contrasts with the Australian context, where opposition tends to come from industry groups representing real estate professionals. In all cases, however, the concept of the everyman landlord is used to sanitise the industry, not unlike the unfortunate habit some landlords have of applying a thin layer of paint over the mouldy walls of a dilapidated bathroom.

Part of the power of opponents is also the natural sympathy they enjoy from legislators, very few of whom have personal experience of long-term renting and who tend to own investment properties at above-average levels.[43] While direct self-interest isn't necessarily the problem here, it is inevitable that politicians are influenced by their own experiences and this affects where their allegiance would tend to lie. As Dallas Rogers states*:* "It would be imprudent to assume prima facie that the property holdings of Australian politicians do not play a role in their political thinking…."[44] The recent election of renter politicians like Aotearoa's Chlöe Swarbrick and Australia's Max Chandler-Matthews in fact helps to demonstrate the significance of these influences, with these politicians explicitly speaking to their experiences as renters and how this shapes the perspective they bring to political decision-making.

What this means is that housing justice is a Sisyphean task: any time we push that boulder up the hill, our opponents will strive to push it back. One interviewee told me that, yet again, the Supreme Court of the United States is being asked to hear a case against the constitutionality of rent control. In the US, virtually everyone said something along these lines: you win it then you defend it, "you have to keep fighting to keep your victories". While Australia does not currently have significant victories to defend, recent positive steps mean that this is a likely emerging threat. We can also see from recent history how the industry has been able to compromise otherwise worthwhile action: in Victoria an omnibus reform bill retained no cause termination and gave lessors a new power to require tenants to pay for professional cleaning at the end of a tenancy.

A final note: even where opponents aren't openly attacking tenant protections, we should be alert to what they are doing to pursue their interests. As one UK respondent pointed out — maybe they aren't acting on tenancy law, but they are pushing to weaken council housing and to support further financialisation through corporate structures like build-to-rent. When thinking about what we are defending — or fighting for — we should not limit our conception to tenancy law alone. Nor, as Lukes' dimension of power reminds us, should we limit our conception just to concrete outcomes. While a firefight may be going on above the trenches, sappers are tunnelling underneath, planting charges, attempting to engineer radical cultural and legislative shifts to make it even harder to win decent homes for all.

4.3 Corporatisation of both smaller and larger landlords

A final phenomenon that arose frequently in conversation was corporatisation: the concentration of investment properties in the hands of corporate owners, as opposed to

individuals. Or as multiple people put it: “your landlord is an LLC”. In this section I will discuss what this trend looks like, the behaviour of corporate landlords, and the implications for the people renting from them.

Although corporatisation is not new, it has become much more common in the USA following the Great Recession of 2008. The foreclosure of single-family homes created an opportunity for corporate investors, who began buying up such properties at a large scale. Since then, corporate entities have also been buying entire multi-family dwellings, amassing portfolios that can run into the hundreds of buildings and tens of thousands of units. Although some respondents suggested that this is nothing new, JustFix analysis of NYC data dating from 2003 reveals a shift after 2008. From 2003 to 2008, sales by individuals to corporations and by corporations to individuals happened at roughly the same rate. Following 2008, purchases by corporations from individuals increased markedly, representing a net flow from individual ownership to corporate ownership.[45] As part of this trend, it’s become more common for individuals, even with relatively small portfolios, to adopt the corporate structure of an LLC.

The corporatisation trend is visible in the ownership structures but can also be glimpsed in the systems and procedures adopted by landlords. Individual landlords as well as corporates are also using digital technologies to remove the remaining human element from landlordism, increasingly leaving just an algorithm in its place. *ProPublica* recently reported on software used by a growing number of landlords to maximise rental returns, generally by pushing rent increases and holding back properties from the market. The developers of this software highlight the lack of empathy as a benefit: unlike humans who may demonstrate compassion, the faceless software feels no scruples about potentially making someone homeless to maximise corporate incomes.[46] In Australia, a new online application platform uses an opaque algorithm to rank renters out of 100.[47]

Rent regulation is a partial counter to the rapaciousness of corporate landlords. But where such regulation allows rents to be increased when tenants move out, it provides landlords a perverse incentive to remove incumbent tenants. In Copenhagen, the tactics of one corporate landlord became known as *ryste bygningen* or “shake the building”: evoking the idea of a landlord shaking the building, as if it were an apple tree, to dislodge tenants.[33] This may involve ‘cash for keys’ style arrangements, where a landlord pays a tenant to move out. It can also involve deliberate harassment of tenants and neglect of landlord responsibilities to drive tenants to self-evict. In San Francisco, campaigners told me of how the finance industry encourages and enables exactly this behaviour, with corporate investors buying rent-stabilised buildings at a valuation that demands such conduct. Consistent with this, the aforementioned JustFix analysis found that larger landlords are more active in rapidly gentrifying areas and that they evict tenants at higher rates compared to smaller landlords.[45]

Beside the increased risk of eviction or mercenary rent increases, corporatisation also obfuscates legal responsibility to make it harder for tenants even to know who they are letting from. This allows delinquent landlords to avoid responsibility or reputational risk. It makes it harder for maltreated tenants to seek redress. From NYC organisation Tenants and Neighbours I heard about a group of people whose neighbours died due to a fire in their rented building; the remaining tenants struggled to find out which individual could be held accountable: “The entity behind Manhattanville Holdings remains unclear.”[48] Another person

told me of going to a property inspection where they never saw a human face, instead admitting themselves after collecting keys from a digital lockbox.

It seems landlords are increasingly trying to distance themselves even from the possibility of caring about the people they rent to. As Hannah Arendt warned in *On Violence:*

> *"In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant."*[49]

It is likely that these are harbingers of what is to come in Australia and perhaps the UK. In Australia we are increasingly hearing about "build-to-rent"[50], with for-profit developers singing its praises, positioning themselves as a benign alternative to amateur landlords, and winning plaudits. However, where build-to-rent operators already exist, their conduct is reprehensible: mercenary rent increases and the use of eviction to punish or discourage retaliation are not unheard of.[51] At the same time, more landlords are distancing themselves with the increased use of property managers[52], and it's also becoming more common for investors to adopt a more corporate, hands-off approach, for example by using professional intermediaries and investing across state borders.[53] We also see real estate agencies shifting away from colloquial approaches and towards digital systems both for tenancy applications and for the management of maintenance requests, removing agency and flexibility from the process.[52]

This is not a one-way process with unstoppable momentum. Until 2019, New York tenancy law encouraged landlords to fraudulently evict tenants, because by doing so they could reap a windfall when renting the same apartment out at a higher rate. Landlords might send out tens of bogus eviction notices, confident that the profit from even a handful of capitulations would make it worthwhile. The 2019 Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act helped to change this, removing the 'vacancy bonus' and thus part of the incentive for landlords to behave this way. Even when corporate landlords are at large, rental reform has the potential to change incentives and thus reshape behaviour, helping to preserve stability and affordability for vulnerable tenants.

The corporatisation trend in the US has been a bad thing for renters there, and it should be a concern for people renting in Australia and the UK. However, the current paradigm is hardly ideal either. Rather than limit our imagination to a choice between incompetent small-scale commodification or professional large-scale commodification, we can celebrate and build upon the beachheads of decommodification that have been won. In the next section of this report I turn to lessons and insights to build a stronger movement in Australia.

5. Implications and recommendations

In this section I discuss three central recommendations that came to me from my research. Overall, these recommendations are about creating a more powerful movement, not just stronger individual organisations. This reflects the fact that winning outcomes is the province of movements, not just of organisations. Here, I use the analogy of a movement 'ecosystem', suggesting a diversity of different organisations playing different, complementary roles. My recommendations cover movement functions that I see as being particularly important, and perhaps relatively lacking in the Australian context: cultural change and grassroots power-building. My third recommendation is about the value of creating a diverse movement overall. This should be a concern for leaders of individual organisations but also potentially for funders or others without an affiliation to a particular group.

Overriding these ideas is the importance of decommodification. Time and time again in my conversations and reading it became clear that the problem we are confronting is this: housing, which should be about providing homes for people, is instead increasingly about investment opportunities for corporations. 'Commodification' or 'financialisation' are terms used to describe this trend; 'decommodification' or perhaps 'rehoming' is the necessary antidote. This idea should certainly inform narrative work, discussed below, but also the policy solutions we identify and propose. Measures like rent control and public housing help to make housing function as a home, weakening its value as an asset. This is a desirable outcome. Conversely, some superficially-appealing solutions may perpetuate commodification. In our visions, in our messages, in our policy development, our thrust must be to centre the needs of people and the value of home.

5.1 We need a different cultural conversation around housing

While the US, the UK and Australia are different cultures, they share certain cultural ideas about the valour of ownership and the inferiority of renting and renters. Ownership is the dream: what you aspire to and how you know when you've made it in the world. Renting is what you have left over when you can't achieve ownership. Renters are failures, second-class citizens lacking "moral worth and dignity".[54] These ideas, often unspoken, operate as Lukes' third face of power, shaping what is seen as acceptable and normal. As advocates for a different normal, we can't just suggest alternative policies. In addition, we must suggest alternative narratives to help people understand housing, ownership and renting in a new way. We need a message for the moment — and a narrative for the movement.

Changing the cultural conversations means:

- Dismantling opponent narratives
- Developing and strengthening our own narratives
- Supporting people who rent to be messengers.

5.1.1 Dismantling opponent narratives

It's important that we understand what we are up against and what we are trying to change. Although narratives used by opponents will differ from country to country, likely recurring

themes are the value of ownership, owners, and landlords, and the moral failing of renters. We see this in assertions of: the property rights of owners, the positive contribution of landlords (for example as providers of housing), and the deviance of renters (for example as vandals of a beloved family home).

How do we change these narratives? I use the word “dismantle” because trying to rebut or counter these narratives can be worse than useless: by activating the narrative in a listener’s brain, we can end up making it stronger![55] Instead we need to avoid these narratives and at every opportunity pivot to an assertion of our own ideals and values.

We should also recognise that tenant campaigners are ourselves part of this culture. We may have come to accept as normal and acceptable presumptions that, in a different cultural context, wouldn’t hold up. In one memorable conversation, someone told me he thought we should be fighting for a world without evictions. Not just ending unfair evictions or fraudulent evictions — but all evictions. It made me realise that I too could be more visionary in thinking about what we are working towards and what tenants deserve. We as campaigners, and the renters we work with, have internalised narratives that help to defend and maintain the status quo. We should try to become aware of this, and to change it.

5.1.2 Developing and strengthening our own narratives

In addition to knowing what we are against, we need to know what we are for. So often, when we are fighting, we construct these ideas in the negative: repairs shouldn’t be neglected, people shouldn’t die from mould or fires, rent increases shouldn’t be excessive. In fact, what we are for is simple: people should have homes. Our homes should be kept decent, kept safe, kept healthy. Our homes should be affordable so that we can pay rent and still have a dignified existence. And we must be in control of when and how we move from our homes.

What we value, what we believe in, what we want the world to be like: this should inform our every writing and public utterance. Crucially, this should also inform the policies we advocate for publicly. While ‘inside track’ work may necessitate compromise, our policy communication in the public arena has an important influence on the culture and the boundaries of political possibility: an appeasement approach not only risks getting worse outcomes now, it shrinks imagination and sends a message that people who rent don’t deserve more. Fortunately, many organisations I spoke with did have bold, imaginative visions for action, and their policies reflected this. For example, the push for good cause evictions in New York State wasn’t just about giving tenants more security: it also represents that the role of housing is to provide secure homes, not to prioritise the property rights and investment returns of a non-resident.

5.1.3 Supporting renters as messengers and spokespeople

While the message matters, so does the messenger. We should support people who rent to be messengers at every opportunity, advocating on behalf of themselves and those with whom they have a common concern.

There are various reasons for this. Firstly, when a renter is speaking about their experience of renting, they have a powerful authority. This is more emotionally compelling and harder for an audience to ignore. What a person comes to believe is much more about their subconscious, their emotional reactions, their ‘vibes’, than any data or figures. Renters who can speak to their own emotional experience of renting are the best placed to promote empathy and connection. Whether the audience is a mass public or an individual decision-maker, this matters.

Secondly, there’s a fundamental question of legitimacy when staff are speaking about renting, especially when those staff aren’t renters themselves. Workers in NGOs (or core volunteers in an autonomous tenants’ union) will develop a sort of composite understanding of what is affecting renters as a group. They’ll speak with plenty of individual renters and hear lots of testimony. This is doubtless a type of expertise. But there remains a level of disconnect and of abstraction when speaking about things happening to someone else. When we speak on behalf of renters, we squander the opportunity to support someone to tell their own story, denying someone the chance to step into their power as a citizen and feel what it is like to make change.

Finally, many people have inaccurate ideas about who renters are. Many people may be stuck thinking of a renter as a twenty-year-old in a sharehouse, not realising that many renters are now in their thirties and raising children. When renters are messengers, particularly in visual formats such as TV or through print photography, it sends a powerful message that puts a human face on renting. This visual communication, more powerful than words, helps to humanise the entire community and create a basis for connection with our audience.

5.2 We need to build the grassroots power of tenants

Everywhere I went I was struck by the work that was going into grassroots power-building. Grassroots groups and NGOs alike were doing organising work and, as discussed earlier, a shift towards this work seems to have increased the power of the tenant movement. In this section I’ll talk about what this work is, why it matters, and how to do it well.

By grassroots power-building, I mean work that engages directly with renters affected by issues and builds their capacity to take action to remedy these issues. This includes actions like eviction defense, forming a tenants’ association, or supporting a busload of tenants to attend and speak up in the halls of power. Key to this approach, which we can also call community organising, is that the organiser is building the capacity of renters, over time, to act with a greater degree of strategic independence. Initially an organiser may play a significant role in developing or coordinating actions. Over time however, they ideally use a process of training, action, and reflection to support renters to generate and implement their own campaigns. The desired outcome of this is a growing number of renters not only participating in but leading organisations and the movement as a whole.

5.2.1 Why power-building matters

Increased tenant leadership means more powerful movements. In part, the mature leaders are ready messengers, helping to do the cultural work described earlier. But there is much

more to it than just this. We can think about this using the concept of WUNC developed by Charles Tilley and expanded upon in a 2017 paper.[56] WUNC is an acronym to capture the features of social movements that help to change public sentiment and influence decision-makers:

- **Worthiness:** acting in a disciplined or eloquent way that maintains the moral high ground. Coming across as deserving
- **Unity:** showing that the movement agrees about its own priorities
- **Numbers:** the perceived size of the movement gives legitimacy and allows movement actors to claim to represent popular will. It also demonstrates a potential electoral threat
- **Commitment:** campaigners show they are serious about the cause and willing to overcome difficulties to take part.

Organising doesn't necessarily contribute to all of these. However, a grassroots power base does contribute to at least some, and I was struck by examples I heard:

- **Worthiness:** when a movement is made up of just activist types or professionals, it can be cast as unrepresentative or ideologically motivated. When citizens and grassroot leaders are involved, their direct struggles provide a moral clarity and emphasise their deservingness. Someone from ACORN UK told me about how having grandmothers involved in an eviction defence action made that action harder for opponents to criticise
- **Numbers:** there are many more renters than there are hardcore activists working on rental issues. To demonstrate numbers, tenant movements must involve grassroots renters, and this is best achieved through providing leadership opportunities and empowerment. The Right to Counsel Coalition had a multitude of different renters speak at public hearings, helping to show the sheer scale of people affected by the issue and to demonstrate support for action
- **Commitment:** because renters aren't professionals, the actions they take demonstrate greater commitment and are thus likely to have more impact on public sentiment or decision-makers. Housing Justice for All staged actions where busloads of renters would travel from New York to Albany to push for greater tenant protections. When grassroots renters are willing to make a six-hour return journey to act on an issue, this commitment carries weight.

Organising thus builds the power of tenant movements by helping to add to perceived worthiness, numbers, and commitment – three key factors identified as contributing to social movement success.

This is important for Australia, and likely to become more so. Although Australian NGOs have been able to win successes in recent years despite a lack of organising or a mobilisable power base, it's not a sure bet that this approach will be sufficient to win greater or lasting victories. The experience from overseas suggests that further progress is likely to be met by increasingly powerful resistance and that the Australian tenant movement will need new and greater sources of power to secure and retain further victories. This does not mean that every group needs to hire an organiser. Rather, we should be aiming for a tenant

movement that involves autonomously-organised groups of renters as well as organisations, perhaps new ones, resourcing the work of community organising.

5.2.2 Connect micro services with macro impact

Doing grassroots power-building well means more than just providing services directly to vulnerable renters. Rather, an effective model is that of combining servicing with opportunities to take further action and become more involved, a pathway I think of as 'micro to macro'.

Trying to solve people's problems for them can embed existing power relationships, leaving people more dependent. This model can achieve short-term results — but it neglects the need to build the community's own capacity. As John McKnight puts it, "services are bad for people".[57] Organisations that focus on symptomatic issues also risk failing to engage with root problems, leaving affected communities with a weak understanding of the factors that shape their lives.

Fortunately, it is possible to support people to meet their immediate needs without undermining longer-term reform. Instead of perpetuating a client/provider relationship with renters, impactful organisations can use the connection that a service relationship provides to build a deeper relationship and grow the political capacity of renters.

I saw multiple examples of this in my travels. San Francisco Tenants Union provides phone counselling to renters in need. But that is the beginning, not the end, of the relationship. They use this to draw renters into their broader advocacy work which may then include, for example, running phone banks to turn out voters in support of candidates that SFTU has endorsed. CUFFH in NYC runs a vital service helping immigrant families to navigate NYC's affordable housing system. But, again, they don't act merely as a service provider. Alongside this role, CUFFH provides many opportunities for renters to build their political consciousness and campaigning capacity, such as supporting people to take part in actions or lobby decision-makers directly. Not only do these organisations combine servicing with organising, they also join the dots between the issues renters are facing in their lives right now and the political context in which these issues exist. These organisations have strategic systems that use service-provision as an onramp to take people on a richer journey.

Peter Murray describes this approach as "the secret of scale" in a *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article.[58] He describes how groups like the NRA and the AARP have provided tangible benefits to members, such as information or insurance, then used that relationship to involve people more deeply in the political work of the organisation. And Liam Flenady reflects in *Jacobin* that a holistic vision for changing the system is much more meaningful when connected to quotidian material improvements: "There is enormous power in linking big-picture conversations to community organizing that gives people a tangible experience of a political project helping improve their lives."[59] A consistent theme is that the big picture work is most powerful when grounded in bread-and-butter issues, and that frontline servicing work is most powerful when integrated into a broader push for systemic change.

The greatest opportunity for this in Australia seems to be in the existing work of community legal centres providing advice and information to renters. Like SFTU, these organisations

are in touch with renters every day. Unlike SFTU, they don't tend to use this contact as way to bring those renters into a community that can grow its capacity over time to take political action. While there are practical limitations on what the advice services can do – some may be limited by the parameters of funding arrangements – we can glimpse here a potential opportunity for the organisation that *is* able to make the stars align.

Doing organising well doesn't necessarily involve providing services. And providing services, in isolation, can make it harder for communities to build independent power. But where a service is being provided, organisations can leverage this to create larger systemic impact.

5.3 We need a diverse ecosystem of tenant organisations

Narrative work and grassroots organising can both contribute to an effective tenant movement. But on their own they are insufficient. The most effective tenant movement is an ecosystem of different organisations playing different roles and providing different services. In this section I will explore the different 'ecosystem services', or organisational roles, we might aim for in a movement – most of which I came across in my travel. I will then discuss the role of coalition organisations and that of funders in helping to create an effective ecosystem.

5.3.1 The different roles organisations can play

An effective movement will have a multitude of organisations that complement each other. These organisations will play different roles, and some organisations may play multiple roles. From my travels, I identified the following roles/functions:

- Narrative work
- Organising work
- Grassroots activity
- NGOs
- Legal services
- Tech and data
- Electoral work
- Research and policy
- Engagement with politicians
- Direct action / militant.

In this section I will briefly describe the different roles and practical examples I saw.

Narrative work
Narrative work is the work of analysing competing narratives, identifying effective narratives for the movement, and helping to promulgate such narratives, potentially directly or through building capacity in other organisations. This can be suited to a national organisation with the reach to influence the discourse across the entire country. It can also emerge from grassroots groups, which can be better at questioning assumptions and making more radical claims. Generation Rent does this work, thinking about how to foster a consistent dialogue across the movement and on how to speak about tenancy issues in a way that could resonate with the ruling Conservative Party.

Organising work
Discussed earlier, this is the work of building the capacity of people who rent to be leaders in influencing the policy decisions that affect their lives. It can be carried out by NGOs or grassroots groups. Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco has staff organisers who work with tenants to form tenant associations, using recent 'union at home' legislation as a basis for supporting tenants to take collective action against landlords.

Grassroots activity

Alongside professional organisations, an effective movement will involve small-scale groups of volunteer activists. This is partly just correlation: when an issue is resonating people will be spontaneously getting together and acting to a larger extent. But it is also causative: grassroots groups are often the source of new energy, ideas, and approaches, forcing other organisations to catch up or be left behind. Duncan Green talks about 'positive deviance', the idea that you can solve a complex problem by trying to identify small-scale examples of people successfully addressing that problem, and then scaling up those examples.[60] Grassroots groups can be key sites of such deviance. Portland Tenants United and Greater Manchester Tenants Union are such groups.

NGOs

NGOs are also part of the social movement landscape. Complementing the work of grassroots groups, they can be particularly useful at the latter stages of a successful movement, playing the "reformer" role noted by Moyer. The more enduring structure of an NGO can help it to remain engaged with a campaign over the longer-term, helping to follow through on implementation and enforcement when other movement actors may have moved on to a new battle. WE ACT, a US NGO, was able to use engagement with the federal government to help ensure $60 billion for environmental justice communities in Biden's Inflation Reduction Act.

Legal services

Any movement can benefit from a legal lens. This can assist with analysing legislation, identifying opportunities for strategic litigation, and supporting potentially arrestable actions. In the tenancy space, there is also a role around helping tenants to know their rights, at both the micro scale of individual tenancies and the larger scale of collective action such as a rent strike. In New York City, Urban Justice Centre provides legal support to tenants to complement the organising work of others, also assisting with developing and reviewing legislation.

Tech and data

As a movement grows, there is more need for specialised functions to add efficacy to existing organisations. Specialist tech organisations can make an entire movement more effective by helping to develop digital tools to do their work. This can also include supporting organisations to deal with large datasets, whether that be from their own supporters or data that is publicly available but not in an intelligible format. While large organisations can often do this work in-house, smaller organisations may benefit from obtaining this service from a third party. An example of this is JustFix in NYC, which badges itself as "technology for housing justice". They interface with public data to make it more accessible and useful, helping organisers to identify targets and plan campaigns. An Australian example of this is the "Rent Tracker" project by Tenants' Union of NSW, which uses published bond data to give an overview of how rents are changing in different areas of NSW.[61]

Electoral work

To do more than just hold the line for renters, we must switch from playing defence to playing offence. A great way to do this is by securing the passage of supportive legislation. And this a lot easier when the people voting on that legislation feel accountable to the social movement in some fashion. As such, while a movement may pursue non-electoral methods

to achieve its objectives, it shouldn't neglect the electoral arena, and some goals may necessitate changing the composition of parliament: either by changing who votes, or how they vote. A change in the balance of power in the New York State Senate was key to the passage of the *Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act*, and this wouldn't have happened without an effort to elect different representatives. Many organisations do this work, often in the US context through an affiliated 501c(4). San Francisco Tenants Union, for example, not only endorses candidates, but will arrange phone banking events for its volunteers to help turn out voters.

Research and policy

As one person remarked to me, "there are issues or patterns that you don't see in the counselling room". To understand the problems we confront, and develop effective solutions, we need to do research and policy work. Dedicated research can identify impending issues on the horizon as well as the broader patterns and causes of injustice. It can also contribute to developing policy solutions, potentially by identifying examples of how others have engaged with and resolved the issue. A little like 'tech and data', this can be thought of as an ancillary function that contributes indirectly to movement success. The UK's New Economics Foundation plays various roles, one of which is research and policy development on housing issues.

Engagement with politicians

Meeting directly with elected officials is a way to communicate your issues directly, without mediation. It's also a chance to bring officials face-to-face with constituents, helping to create a lasting emotional impression that can shape how someone votes – or demonstrate the electoral risk if they don't act. This is distinct from the electoral work described above as it is not necessarily happening around elections and it is not aimed at voters. It can encompass engagement with both government and opposition officials. Shelter UK spoke about supporting their members to meet with local MPs as a way of building political support for housing reforms.

Direct action

Sometimes an injustice is urgent: someone is it risk of being evicted that day. Or sometimes a less urgent injustice is not on the radar at all. Direct action confronts power directly, helping to stop a bad thing from happening, or dramatising a neglected injustice. Eviction defence, where people bodily intervene to stop someone losing their home, is an example of this, as is rent striking – perhaps the oldest and most storied tradition in the tenant tactic toolbox. A member of Crown Heights Tenants Union told me about an eviction-defence effort that was sustained for a month – certainly an example of Tilley's "commitment" in the WUNC framework.

As we can see, there are *many* ways that organisations can contribute to an effective tenant movement – and this list may well not be comprehensive. Bringing together all these disparate parts into a coherent whole is a function in and of itself. Thus I now turn to the role of coalition organisations in helping to bring together different organisations in pursuit of a shared goal.

5.3.2 Power in coalition

The contemporary victories of tenant movements that I heard about were generally attributable to coalitions. Housing Justice for All, a coalition, won the passage of the *Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act.* The Right to Counsel Coalition won legal support for tenants facing eviction. And efforts to end no-cause evictions in the UK, as yet unsuccessful, are coordinated through the Renters Reform Coalition. There seems to be a clear pattern of coalition campaigns. Here, I discuss the value of working in coalition.

A note: terms such as “coalition”, “collaboration, “coordination”, “cooperation” mean different yet often unspecified things. Some imply working together expediently around an individual action, whereas others might be taken to mean a deeper and longer-term working relationship towards a vision that transcends any individual policy accomplishment. “Coalition” implies a degree of structure, a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In this context, I am using the terms roughly interchangeably, without a need to specify each. Suffice to say, while a wholesale “coalition” may not be suitable for every context, in most contexts there will be value in working together to some degree.

So let us now imagine a variety of organisations which put no effort into working together. Each organisation would decide upon its goals independently: they may or may not overlap. It would be harder for an organisation to achieve its goals, because it wouldn’t have the same access to the resources of other groups. Externally, decision-makers would observe disunity and fragmentation, signs of a weak movement. Even supportive decision-makers wouldn’t know which issue to prioritise and might be wary of favouring one group of another. Groups could undermine each other, perhaps through inadvertently suggesting ineffective policies, accepting inadequate proposals, or even publicly criticising other movement organisations. This is not how a winning movement operates.

When groups work together, these potential weaknesses become strengths. Alignment around goals can be difficult and may require organisations to temporarily shift priorities. But it means more wood behind fewer arrows: greater resources marshalled behind the objective and a correspondingly greater chance of success. It is a clear signal to decision-makers regarding what action is being sought and what will draw acclaim or judgement. It’s also a signal to the fourth estate about what the issue of the day is: what is worthy attention. Where disagreement exists, it can be navigated internally, potentially leading to stronger relationships and greater strategic insights, or at least avoiding the negative-sum game of public mudslinging.

This sort of collaboration can happen in a bottom-up fashion, simply by organisations resolving to communicate regularly and work together better. But organisations have many demands on their resources, and network maintenance tends to be a low priority. A solution is to have either a dedicated organisation or a dedicated staff within another organisation whose role is to establish and guide the collaboration. Housing Justice for All is an example of the first solution, whereas the UK Renters Reform Coalition was coordinated by a dedicated staff member embedded in Generation Rent. In either case, the organisation/staff acts as a broker of sorts, potentially performing the necessary secretarial work of any group effort, as well as ensuring alignment around shared objectives and a plan to achieve them.

A key part of this is managing disagreement within a coalition. Coalitions involve an inevitable tension: while getting more individuals and groups involved helps to demonstrate *numbers*, this can compromise the *unity* that is also important to movement success. Coalition coordinators help to manage this balancing act such that a growing coalition, despites its internal differences, can still offer a public performance of unity. This is a particularly hard balance to strike in the absence of a dedicated coordinating organisation or individual.

An ecosystem isn't just plants and animals existing in the same space. It's about the interconnectedness of those organisms and how they can be mutually supportive: how squirrels' burying acorns leads to new oak trees; or like a mycorrhizal network exchanging nutrients beneath the forest floor. This is the sort of ecology we should aspire to for our tenant movements: a web of relationships, a shared vision for change, the exchange of resources, and the collaborative development of strategy. If you are growing separately, you are growing apart. By keeping our shared values central and a bigger vision for what we all want to accomplish, we can help each other to grow together.

5.3.3 The role of funders

Funders have a unique effect on the social movement ecosystem. Their funding decisions determine what grows in the ecosystems and what struggles to thrive. When done well, funding decisions can allow new organisations and approaches to establish themselves and grow to maturity. When done poorly, funding decisions distort an ecosystem from its natural state, potentially shifting it towards approaches that are not necessarily as impactful.

Most organisations I engaged with depended on philanthropic funds to operate. Despite this – or perhaps because of it – groups were often critical of how funding decisions played out. Generally, people found it hard to attract funding for the long-term work of building grassroots power, perhaps with fewer legislative victories to show for it. People wanted to have honest and equal partnerships with funders, but instead responded to a need to massage their work into a framework that funders could make sense of and support: organising work might be pitched as 'homelessness prevention' or 'know your rights'. Donor-funded projects often had shorter timeframes, creating an ironic situation whereby an NGO might be forced to pull out of a community where it had begun to build power, creating a space (and a need) for a grassroots group with more autonomy to move in.

This reflects the reality that "people work on what can get funded". In an ideal world, funders would be part of the ecosystem themselves and have honest trusting relationships such that what *can* get funded aligns with what *should* get funded. But this does not seem to be the case. When in New York I was puzzled by the amount of work done with tenants in rent-regulated apartments: these tenants are a minority of the rental market and are often better protected than other renters who are fully exposed to the caprices of the private rental sector. Although some have framed this as a "pragmatic" effort to organise around existing rights[62], others suggested that this focus reflects funder priorities, not necessarily need in the community nor the true values of movement organisations.

Why does this happen and what can we do about it?

Funders want something to show for their contributions. This may create a bias towards status quo projects involving service delivery that will reliably have some sort of positive impact. But this means a bias against radical projects for large-scale change that risk not succeeding. If we imagine funders as a market investor, they seem to prefer conservative investments in bonds rather than stocks: even though the expected value of the latter may be greater, the increased volatility makes it unappealing. This is ironic given that funders, more so than individual organisations, can and should be thinking about social change as longer-term project. Yet evidence suggests that foundation funding can nudge movements away from contentious advocacy towards the more sanitary work of service delivery, with more mainstream messages and tactics.[63] This may also reflect a desire, conscious or not, to maintain current power relations – albeit with a bit less homelessness.

While there will always be challenges around foundation funding, there are options for improvement and to reduce the potentially harmful effects on social movements. Foundations should aim to be not just funders but partners, trusting in and trusted by the organisations they support. Rather than a narrow focus on tangible outcomes, funders could assess their impact based upon increase in organisational capacity, which can also be demonstrated through frank reflection on setbacks and the lessons learnt from them. So much campaigning work is experimental, and the aim of experiments is to test, not to prove, the hypothesis. This also implies the necessity of longer-term funding, which would also enable greater security for employees and a more systemic approach in their own work.

Funders like make a net-positive contribution to social movements, and much of the work I studied would not be possible without them. Yet there can be negative effects from how funders operate. Particularly given the power they wield, funders should make a deep effort to reflect on their role and how they can play it most effectively to support genuinely transformative social movements.

Case study: Housing justice in New York

In 2019, tenants across New York state won a "generational victory".[32] Housing Justice for All (HJ4A), a coalition of organisations from across the state, secured the passage of the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act (HSTPA). This act improved protections for all renters in the state, particularly rent-regulated tenants. Although rent control wasn't expanded directly, many existing loopholes were closed, helping to preserve the existing stock and discourage predatory evictions that were worsening both homelessness and affordability. These changes benefit millions of renters in a US state with a population nearing that of the whole of Australia.

How was this victory achieved? Campaigning is a complex domain, making it difficult to attribute causality. But published accounts and first-person interviews shed some light on the situation. In my analysis, key factors that helped to contribute to this outcome were:

- **Shifting to a state-wide approach from a focus just on New York City.** HJ4A grew out of the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance. NYC campaigners realised that rental issues were being framed as relevant only for NYC, with upstate legislators feeling uninvested in protecting renters. In response, campaigners began building ties across the state and amplifying the voices of tenants outside NYC.
- **Countering the political power of the real estate lobby.** The real estate lobby is immensely powerful in New York, using political donations to cement allegiances that cross party lines. Organisers responded by changing the composition of the Assembly, through 'primarying' obstructionist Democrats with candidates who refused real estate donations, winning an expanded and supportive Senate majority in the lead-up to 2019.
- **Renewed unity of purpose and collaboration.** Alongside the state-wide approach, organisations – mostly based in NYC – worked together more effectively and got behind a shared agenda. While differences in strategy or priorities are inevitable, HJ4A provided a space for groups to work together, recognising the necessity of this approach if they were to win change.
- **Growth of grassroots activity.** The 2019 victory came about after a spate of new tenant groups forming, often more radical than existing NGOs funded by philanthropy and government dollars. Alongside this, existing groups changed their approaches, investing more in organising to build grassroots power that could counter the economic might of the real estate lobby.
- **A diverse tenant movement.** The movement in New York is home to tenant unions such as you might find elsewhere in the world. But its scale and maturity also enables specialised organisations that are lacking in other movement ecosystems. The efforts of tenants and organisers were supplemented by specialists like JustFix and the Urban Justice Centre who could enhance the impact of others through complementary roles.

It's also worth reflecting that the 2019 victory with the HSTPA was not absolute. Unlike the Emergency Tenant Protection Act of 1974, HSTPA did not restore previously rent-regulated apartments that had left the system through loopholes.[64] While it helped to stem the bleeding, it did little to increase rent-regulated housing stock in NYC. (It did, however, create a foundation for other parts of NY state to introduce rent controls, which could expand stock at a state level). The passage of HSTPA illustrates the power of the NY tenant movement, but also the limited extent of that power.

Further, the years since 2019 present a mixed record for those working in NYC. They were successful in winning an eviction moratorium through Covid – a remarkable success that made a real difference for countless New Yorkers. A related campaign to cancel rental debt was unsuccessful, but perhaps that is unsurprising given its ambition.

More telling is an unsuccessful effort to pass legislation for 'good cause' evictions in the latest New York state session. The draft bill[65] would have ensured that more tenants – around 1.6 million households[66] – could not have their tenancy terminated without a good cause.

Why didn't this legislation pass? One possible explanation is that it wouldn't have benefitted the rent-regulated tenants who in fact make up the power base of the NY movement. Possibly the grassroots renters who power the movement – and have plenty of their own issues to deal with – could not muster the same enthusiasm for an issue that wouldn't affect them directly: a breakdown in solidarity. Another factor might be that legislators, including those supportive of HJ4A, felt that they'd already done enough for tenants and that other issues needed to take priority.

We cannot ever know for sure why HSTPA passed but why good cause has not yet passed. However, it is exactly these sorts of challenging questions that this paper has sought to grapple with:

- What challenges are movements facing, and what opportunities?
- How are we building power, and what is the nature of the power available to us?
- What should be we changing or adapting to be more effective?

The above case study attempts to bring these questions to life, showing what is at stake and how these considerations dominate the thinking of those trying to win change.

6. What else?

Various issues came up in my travels that I have not featured in this report. Here I note a few of these issues, partly to make some record of them, but partly as suggestions for possible directions for any future research, perhaps even another Churchill Fellowship. The issues I wish to note are:

- How to design good rental laws?
- Emerging issues around climate change and housing
- Race, colonisation, and housing.

6.1 How to design good rental laws?

While jurisdictions vary in the strength of their rental laws, they fundamentally all have the same paradigm: there are legal obligations on the landlord and the tenant, and the landlord or the tenant can act if they feel these obligations have been violated. Superficially, this is equitable. But cursory examination reveals otherwise: in the landlord-tenant relationship, it is the tenant whose home is affected when the other party breaks the law, and whose housing is at risk if there is retaliation for advocacy. While a landlord may suffer property damage or financial loss from a breach of the tenancy contract, they are relatively insulated. As such, the tenant is both more affected by wrongdoing and more wary of trying to exercise their rights. In practice this means that many laws are *de facto* voluntary.

Addressing this would require a paradigm shift in how we draft and enforce tenancy laws. One possible solution is to introduce effective third-party enforcement, perhaps through an adequately resourced ombudsman. A complementary solution could be a genuine

abundance of housing, such that lessors faced a real risk of economic loss (ie, of rental income) if they did not do what the law required. We might also consider the cultural and economic factors that cause landlords to neglect their duties and speculate that greater professionalisation, perhaps through mandatory licensing and registration, could assist. An effective system is one where compliance with tenancy laws isn't obtained through threats and penalties but is as culturally normal as waiting in a queue.

6.2 How climate change is affecting renters

A large part of Better Renting's work in Australia relates to the energy performance of rental homes, which are typically too cold in winter and too hot in summer. This is an emerging issue for those I met with overseas. While New York for example has long had requirements around winter heating, the new threat posed by climate change with respect to summer heat is drawing the attention of tenant organisers in both the USA and the UK. One renter in the UK described how during one heatwave they turned their hot water tank off in a desperate attempt to reduce indoor heat. As this threat worsens and becomes even more pressing, tenant organisations through the world will need to respond, drawing public attention to the health implications and developing and demanding policy solutions.

6.3 Race, colonisation, and housing

The interaction between race and housing has a long and appalling history in the US. The existence of terms such as "redlining" and "block busting" highlights that not only have these practices happened, but that they are understood and known at a conceptual level. Conversely, the relative absence of such analysis in the Australian discourse is less so evidence that similar practices don't happen, and more so evidence that there is little understanding of or attention paid to racism in the housing sector. Yet in West Australia, we have the public housing authority using "without grounds" termination notices disproportionately against Aboriginal tenants — a practice that has now resulted in a complaint to the Human Rights Commission.[67] In the Northern Territory, the Government is proposing a new "Remote Rent Framework" that will dramatically increase the rent liabilities of mostly Aboriginal renters in remote communities.[68] Clearly this is an issue warranting scrutiny.

Housing plays a central role in contributing to quality of life in the present, but also in passing down wealth across generations. While ownership is receding from the grasp of many, this is likely particularly true for Indigenous Australians, who are then disproportionately left to deal with a private rental sector that continues to deny people who rent decent homes. Australia may well benefit from a more honest reflection on how colonisation has shaped, and continues to shape, access to decent housing.

7. Conclusion

The experience of tenant movements in the USA and the UK offers insights for tenant advocates in Australia. In those countries, we see trends that presage what the future may hold for Australia: increasingly powerfully and successful tenant movements, unyielding opposition from the real estate industry, and corporatisation of the private rental sector. From the experience of overseas organisations and an awareness of these trends we can think about what is needed in Australia. I argue that we need to promote a different narrative around renting, build the grassroots power of renters, and establish a more diverse and collaborative ecosystem of tenant organisations.

In practice, what does this mean for advocates operating in Australia today? For one, tenant organisations can make it a priority to centre renters as messengers as spokespeople. We can aim for a system whereby journalists who seek comment from staff instead end up hearing from renters directly about their experiences. This can be supported by investing more in building the media skills of renters and building ongoing relationships that facilitate this sort of participation. Established organisations can also support a richer ecosystem by helping out new groups, where possible. Starting a group is difficult, and the early days are the most likely time for a group to give up and disappear. Reaching out, listening, and offering desired support can help incipient groups to become more firmly rooted. Relatedly, groups should be talking with each other. More important than formal collaboration is having a network of organisations that are talking, sharing information, discussing challenges, and synthesising lessons. This creates space within the movement for people to take risks, earn insight, and socialise hard-eraned wisdom as widely as possible.

In summary, it's safe to say that my Churchill Fellowship deepened my outrage against what tenants face and my conviction that we must do more than tinker around the edges. The concept of decommodification goes to the heart of what has gone wrong in housing, and what we must do about it. The fundamental problem facing people who rent is that their home also exists somewhere else on a balance sheet, as a source of enrichment for someone who thinks about the property not as a home but as an asset. The solution to this is decommodification: making property less appealing as a commodity and more effective at providing homes. This need not happen through a single revolutionary action. It can be achieved incrementally, if those incremental steps take us in the right direction. Protections like rent control and just cause eviction are part of this journey, as they use the law to safeguard the sanctity of home, reducing the control of the property owner to benefit the person whose home it is. We should pursue every opportunity to do this.

In one analysis, wealth comes about by exploiting the surplus value of labour. While we may criticise such capitalists, we can at least appreciate that they are using labour to produce something. Now, what we are increasingly seeing is that wealth accrues simply by extracting the growth in value of land. These real estate capitalists produce nothing, and in the meanwhile they're happy to take 30%+ of workers' salaries to do it. Many fights over economic justice have happened in workplaces, as workers sought a greater share of the profits that their labour creates. But more and more now, in an account in the Cayman Islands, profit is being generated from our homes. This is the new site of capitalist extraction, the new ground zero in the fight for economic justice. And renters are on the frontline.

Bibliography

1. Better Renting. About - Better Renting. *Better Renting* https://www.betterrenting.org.au/about.
2. Lukes, S. *Power: a radical view*. (Macmillan, 1974).
3. Heywood, A. *Politics*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
4. Bachrach, P. & Baratz, M. S. *Power and poverty*. (1979).
5. johnswentworth. Interfaces as a Scarce Resource. *LessWrong* https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/hyShz2ABiKX56j5tJ/interfaces-as-a-scarce-resource (2020).
6. Churches United for Fair Housing. About Us. *CUFFH* https://www.cuffh.org.
7. JustFix. Tools. *JustFix* https://www.justfix.org.
8. Moyer, B. *Doing democracy: the MAP model for organizing social movements*. (New Society Publishers, 2001).
9. *Our Rights! Our Power!* (2020).
10. UK Government. Government announces end to unfair evictions. *GOV.UK* https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-end-to-unfair-evictions (2019).
11. Renters Reform Coalition. Who's Involved. *Renters Reform Coalition* https://www.rentersreformcoalition.co.uk/whos-involved (2021).
12. Geraghty, L. Liz Truss says she will honour Tory pledge to ban no-fault evictions after all. *The Big Issue* https://www.bigissue.com/news/housing/liz-truss-says-she-will-honour-tory-pledge-to-ban-no-fault-evictions-after-all/ (2022).
13. 'My time at Number 10': an interview with former government housing advisor Toby Lloyd. *Inside Housing* https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/my-time-at-number-10-an-interview-with-former-government-housing-advisor-toby-lloyd-63073.
14. Elsemore, L. New polling shows the political importance of renters. *Renters Reform Coalition* https://rentersreformcoalition.co.uk/content/new-polling-shows-political-importance-renters (2022).
15. Housing Rights Committee San Francisco. Union At Home. http://hrcsf.org/union-at-home/ (2022).
16. Wang, V. New Rent Laws Pass in N.Y.: 'The Pendulum Is Swinging' Against Landlords. *The New York Times* (2019).
17. Schmidt, G. 'At Their Breaking Point': Tenants Fight to Stay in Their Homes. *The New York Times* (2022).
18. Maloney, G. How we won a rent freeze in Scotland. *Huck* https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/activism-2/how-we-won-a-rent-freeze-in-scotland/ (2022).
19. Rent Control in Minnesota (Minneapolis and Saint Paul). *www.nolo.com* https://www.nolo.com/legal-updates/rent-control-in-minnesota-minneapolis-and-saint-paul.html.
20. Chang, C. Kingston Becomes the First Upstate City to Adopt Rent Control. *Curbed* https://www.curbed.com/2022/08/kingston-upstate-rent-control.html (2022).
21. CBS News. Antioch approves rent stabilization ordinance in close vote. *CBS Bay Area* https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/antioch-approves-rent-stabilization-ordinance-close-vote/ (2022).
22. Kassel. Bell Gardens Rent Control Victory. *Liberty Hill* https://www.libertyhill.org/news/blog/bell-gardens-rent-control-victory/ (2022).

23. Card, K. From the streets to the statehouse: how tenant movements affect housing policy in Los Angeles and Berlin. *Hous. Stud.* 1–27 (2022) doi:10.1080/02673037.2022.2124236.
24. Dougherty, C. The Rent Revolution Is Coming. *The New York Times* (2022).
25. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC Issues Eviction Moratorium Order in Areas of Substantial and High Transmission. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s0803-cdc-eviction-order.html (2021).
26. U.S. Department of the Treasury. Emergency Rental Assistance Program. *U.S. Department of the Treasury* https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/emergency-rental-assistance-program (2023).
27. Hogan, G. Tenants' hopes dashed as 'good cause' eviction bill meets Albany chopping block. *Gothamist* https://gothamist.com/news/tenants-hopes-dashed-as-good-cause-eviction-bill-meets-albany-chopping-block (2022).
28. Burke, T., Stone, W. & Goodall, Z. How 5 key tenancy reforms are affecting renters and landlords around Australia. *The Conversation* http://theconversation.com/how-5-key-tenancy-reforms-are-affecting-renters-and-landlords-around-australia-187779.
29. Martin, C. Australian Residential Tenancies Law in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations of Housing and Property Rights. *Univ. New South Wales Law J.* **44**, (2021).
30. Coates, B. The Great Australian Nightmare. *Grattan Institute* https://grattan.edu.au/news/the-great-australian-nightmare/ (2022).
31. Madden, D. J. & Marcuse, P. *In defense of housing: the politics of crisis*. (Verso, 2016).
32. Weaver, C. From Universal Rent Control to Cancel Rent: Tenant Organizing in New York State. *New Labor Forum* **30**, 93–98 (2021).
33. O'Brien, H. The Blackstone rebellion: how one country took on the world's biggest commercial landlord. *The Guardian* (2022).
34. ViforJ, R. O. More rented, more mortgaged, less owned: what the census tells us about housing. *The Conversation* http://theconversation.com/more-rented-more-mortgaged-less-owned-what-the-census-tells-us-about-housing-185893 (2022).
35. Khurshid, S. As Affordability Crisis Becomes More Acute, Real Estate Donations Emerge as Litmus Test for Some Democrats. *Gotham Gazette* https://www.gothamgazette.com/state/8112-as-affordability-crisis-becomes-more-acute-real-estate-donations-emerge-as-litmus-test-for-some-democrats (2018).
36. Clark, B. Homeowner or renter? Your answer could reveal how you vote. *Crikey* https://www.crikey.com.au/2022/08/12/homeowner-renter-vote/ (2022).
37. Durkin, P. Pandemic politics, demographics blamed for Liberal wipeout. *Australian Financial Review* (2022).
38. Dexter, R. 'Hot political real estate': how powerful will renters be this election? *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2022).
39. Douglass, F. West India Emancipation. (1857).
40. Tufekci, Z. *Twitter and tear gas: the power and fragility of networked protest*. (Yale University Press, 2017).
41. Shenker-Osorio, A. *Don't buy it: the trouble with talking nonsense about the economy*. (PublicAffairs, 2012).
42. Hulse, K., Reynolds, M. & Martin, C. The Everyman archetype: discursive reframing of private landlords in the financialization of rental housing. *Hous. Stud.* 1–23 (2019) doi:10.1080/02673037.2019.1644297.

43. Yim, N. Revealed: Landlord pollies with biggest property portfolios. *The Daily Telegraph* (2022).
44. Rogers, D. Politicians hold $300m in property, so how should they influence housing policy? *The Conversation* http://theconversation.com/politicians-hold-300m-in-property-so-how-should-they-influence-housing-policy-30206 (2014).
45. Stovall, A. The Corporatization of NYC Real Estate. *JustFix* https://medium.com/justfixorg/corporatization-of-nyc-real-estate-83e2bf191b73 (2022).
46. Vogell, H. Rent Going Up? One Company's Algorithm Could Be Why. *ProPublica* https://www.propublica.org/article/yieldstar-rent-increase-realpage-rent (2022).
47. Convery, S. Imperfect match: Australian renters in the dark over use of data by tech company Snug. *The Guardian* (2022).
48. After Deadly Harlem Fire, Tenants Plan Rent Strike Over Bad Conditions. *Harlem, NY Patch* https://patch.com/new-york/harlem/after-deadly-harlem-fire-tenants-plan-rent-strike-over-bad-conditions (2022).
49. Arendt, H. *On violence*. (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970).
50. Larry. Investor snaps up entire Sydney apartment development. *Australian Financial Review* (2022).
51. Burnside, N. As Canberra's housing market continues to climb, renters like Diane face an uncertain future. *ABC News* (2021).
52. Hulse, K., Martin, C., James, A. & Stone, W. Private rental in transition: institutional change, technology and innovation in Australia. *AHURI Final Rep.* (2018) doi:10.18408/ahuri-5112101.
53. Hulse, K., Parkinson, S. & Martin, C. Inquiry into the future of the private rental sector. *AHURI Final Rep.* (2018) doi:10.18408/ahuri-5112001.
54. Vassenden, A. Homeownership and Symbolic Boundaries: Exclusion of Disadvantaged Non-homeowners in the Homeowner Nation of Norway. *Hous. Stud.* **29**, 760–780 (2014).
55. Lakoff, G. *Don't think of an elephant! : know your values and frame the debate : the essential guide for progressives*. (Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004).
56. Wouters, R. & Walgrave, S. What Makes Protest Powerful? Reintroducing and Elaborating Charles Tilly's WUNC Concept. SSRN Scholarly Paper at https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2909740 (2017).
57. McKnight, J. Services are bad for people: You're either a citizen or a client. *Organizing* 41–44.
58. Murray, P. The Secret of Scale (SSIR). *Stanford Social Innovation Review* https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_secret_of_scale (2013).
59. Munckton, S. The Brisbane Greens Are Building a Mass Party With Unashamedly Left-Wing Politics. https://jacobin.com/2022/10/brisbane-australian-greens-organizing-left-wing-strategy-parliament (2022).
60. Green, D. *How change happens*. (Oxford University Press, 2016).
61. Tenants' Union of NSW. Rent Tracker Research Project. https://www.tenants.org.au/tu/rent-tracker.
62. Robbins, G. New York's housing justice movement: facing the COVID eviction cliff edge. *City* **26**, 610–629 (2022).
63. Corrigall-Brown, C. Funding for Social Movements. *Sociol. Compass* **10**, 330–339 (2016).
64. McKee, M. *A brief history: The rent stabilization system in New York City and New York State*. 4 (2022).

65. Salazar, J. *Prohibition of Eviction Without Good Cause*.
66. Kaysen, R. What Is ‘Good Cause Eviction,’ and What Does It Mean for Renters? *The New York Times* (2022).
67. Convery, S. Aboriginal man takes public housing eviction to Human Rights Commission alleging racism. *The Guardian* (2022).
68. ‘Rethink this policy’: Remote rent changes delayed after backlash over rising bills. *ABC News* (2022).

Appendix 1: Itinerary

Date	Country	Interviewees	Organisation
29 Aug	USA	J. Scott Weaver	San Francisco Tenants Union
29 Aug	USA	Lenea Maibaum, Fred Sherburn Zimmer	Housing Rights Committee San Francisco
30 Aug	USA	Shanti Singh	Tenants Together
30 Aug	USA	Isaac Sevier	
31 Aug	USA	Jake Henceroth	Portland Tenants United
2 Sep	USA	Abby Ng	Tenants and Neighbours
4 Sep	USA	Marika Dias	Urban Justice Centre
5 Sep	USA	Michael McKee	TenantsPAC
6 Sep	USA	Joel Montano	UCLA; Centre for Economic Survival
6 Sep	USA	Andrea Shapiro	Metropolitan Council on Housing
8 Sep	USA	Johanna Monge	JustFix
8 Sep	USA	Pablo Estupiñan	CASA / Right to Counsel
9 Sep	USA	Sonal Jessel	WE ACT
9 Sep	USA	Joel Feingold	Crown Heights Tenants Union
10 Sep	USA	Cea Weaver	Housing Justice for All
12 Sep	USA	Brayan Pagoada	Churches United For Fair Housing
14 Sep	UK	Livi Elsmore	Renters Reform Coalition
15 Sep	UK	Jack Madden	Shelter UK
15 Sep	UK	David Madden	LSE
16 Sep	UK	Glyn Robbins	Defend Council Housing
20 Sep	UK	Fiona Meldrum	Citizens Wales
21 Sep	UK	Emma Saunders	Living Rent Scotland
22 Sep	UK	Tilly Smith	Generation Rent
22 Sep	UK	Camille Furtado	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
27 Sep	UK	Heather Kennedy	New Economics Foundation
28 Sep	UK	Isaac Rose	Greater Manchester Tenants Union
28 Sep	UK	Emily Ali	ACORN London
29 Sep	UK	Dan Wilson Craw	Generation Rent
29 Sep	UK	Portia Msimang	Renters Rights London