

## Centenary flashback: Post-war housing crisis sparks Royal Commission

Just five weeks after Germany surrendered in World War II, a national conference was held in Melbourne on the 14 June 1945, to discuss Australia's urgent need for more housing.

It was estimated that it would take at least five years to overtake the shortage of 300,000 houses in Australia, even with increased provision of building materials and labour.

"The acute housing shortage in the post-war period was world wide," reported *The West Australian* in 1952.

"In Europe the shortage of accommodation was brought about largely through bomb damage. The shortage in Australia was brought about by cessation of house building during the war years, and by the unprecedented influx of immigrants from the United Kingdom, and from other parts of Europe during 1945 – 1950.

"During this time Western Australia's population growth rate of 3.5 per cent was one of the highest in the world followed by Australia's overall growth rate of 2.6 per cent and Canada with 2.33 per cent."

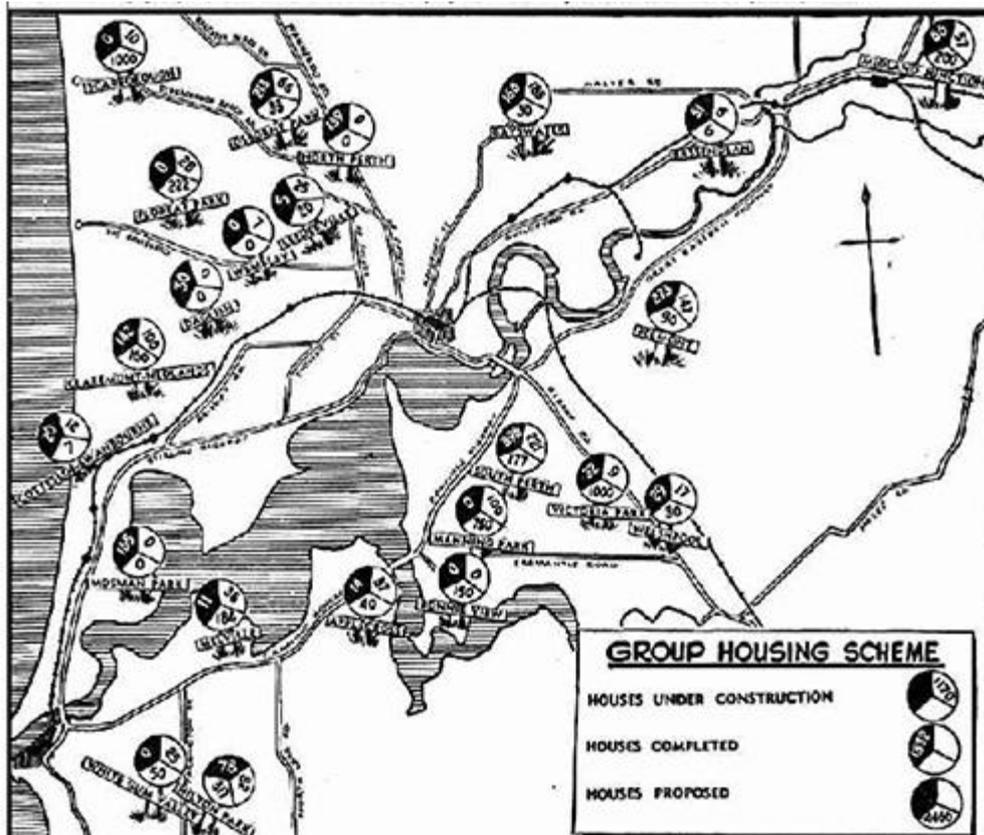
Faced with an enormous challenge, housing was appointed its own ministerial portfolio in 1947 and the humble Workers' Homes Board was replaced by the State Housing Commission. The Commission listed its purpose as 'to provide modest accommodation on a massive scale - and quickly.'

Over the next 10 years, the Commission built 20,000 homes under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement Act, accounting for 41% of houses built in WA at the time.



*Top: housing being built in Bayswater, 1948*

*Above: A panoramic view of housing built in South Perth from 1945 - 1948*



A map of the main metropolitan areas in which the State Housing Commission has built and is building group homes, 1949

Despite this tremendous effort, housing numbers in WA were still short by an estimated 30,000 and the demand to build houses quickly, had placed the Commission into hot water.

In 1947, a Royal Commission was ordered into housing following allegations of ‘improper practices in the granting of building permits and allocation of houses.’

These allegations came during a time when the Commission was responsible for allocating permits under the Building Operations and Materials Control Act, which had been put in place after the War to ration building supplies.

“(The Control Act was) necessary to ensure that labour and material were directed to where they would do the greatest service to the community,” reported *The West Australian* in 1952.

With the demand for housing outstripping the supply of building materials, some Commission employees were offered bribes and other incentives to approve building permits or release building materials.

Employee, William Minney, revealed to the Royal Commission that he had been offered bribes via telephone and during out-of-work hours – which he never accepted.

“He (Minney) liked to have a drink but recently found it necessary to change his hotel because of the people who tried to ingratiate themselves with him,” reported the *Daily News* in 1948.

“A man once offered him 10 shillings a bag for each bag of cement he could have released.”

The Royal Commission into housing closed in 1948 with the Commissioner finding any allegations of dishonesty made against the State Housing Commission, with one minor exception, to be unjustified.



*Premier and Housing Minister, Duncan McLarty, handing over the keys to the 1000th home built under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, in South Perth, 1947*