

Australia: Max Chandler-Mather: ‘Labor is the political wing of the banking and property industry’

Wednesday 27 March 2024, by [CHANDLER-MATHER Max](#), [FUENTES Federico](#), [MUNCKTON Stuart](#) (Date first published: 28 February 2024).

A new phase in the battle for real solutions to Australia’s housing crisis has opened up around Labor’s “help-to-buy” housing scheme, which it says will help first-home buyers.

Last year, the Greens waged a months-long campaign against Labor’s [Housing Australia Future Fund \(HAFF\) bill](#). The Greens argued it would do little to ease the worsening housing crisis — and would likely make it worse.

The Greens only agreed to pass the bill after securing an extra \$3 billion for public and community housing. Now they want Labor’s new housing bill to include a rent-freeze, changes to “negative gearing” among other measures.

Stuart Munckton and **Federico Fuentes** spoke with Greens housing spokesperson **Max Chandler-Mather** late last year. In this short extract from a longer interview published at [links.org.au](#), Chandler-Mather reflects on the opportunities the campaign opened up for this new battle.

After months of struggle around Labor’s bill, the Greens supported an amended bill. Could you reflect on the campaign and outcome?

The first thing to say is that this was just the start of the campaign. By no means do we think that the result we got in any way gets close to fixing the housing crisis.

But there were three important practical outcomes.

The first is that separate to Labor’s HAFF, we secured \$3 billion of direct investment in public and community housing.

We got a commitment that all funding for that housing would go towards a particular, design standard for those homes, including energy efficiency and disability access.

We got a commitment around guaranteeing \$500 million of investment every year after that.

Obviously we wanted much more. Our demands on the table at the time were for a freeze on rent increases, coordinated by the national cabinet, and much more money every year directly for public housing.

The other thing that came out of it was in terms of a manifestation of our power. The Prime Minister and every premier in the country had to start to talk about a national plan for renters and respond to

the mobilisation that we had built.

Obviously we did not get what we wanted out of that [discussion]. But I think, in and of itself, that was a breakthrough.

The other thing was that this was a qualitative shift in the way people understand parliament and politics.

I think it was an evolution in the Queensland Greens organising strategy. We took the organising capacity we had built and that philosophy [we used in the election campaign], and attempted to use it to build our negotiating power in parliament.

This was the first time where the activity of volunteers could be directly linked to a material win in parliament. That is almost as important as the actual win we got, in the sense that all of a sudden these volunteers now recognise that they had a collective power they could wield and can wield in the future.

One of the contradictions we still have not worked out is, if there is a large people-powered movement to help build leverage in parliament, how do we make sure that they do not feel alienated by the decisions the parliamentary party ends up making?

How do we make sure there is a much stronger democratic connection between the two?

That is something for the party to improve. I do not think we fully solved this in this housing fight but, at the very least, it felt like there was some connection between the two.

In the end the Greens accepted the HAAF bill. Was it because you felt the longer you waited the more people might be convinced by Labor's attacks on you?

We knew the bill was coming back [to be debated] on October 16, which would have been the final day of parliament for that sitting. We had to make a choice: either we voted it up or we voted it down.

We had already got the billions in the social housing accelerator, where it is widely acknowledged that it was us that got it. And one way or another, we were going to lose our leverage specifically on that bill if we voted it down.

Also the Voice campaign was really picking up and, understandably, there were some people who really wanted to divert their energy there as well.

Our organisational capacity was waning; not as many people were getting involved for a variety of reasons. We felt we had reached the point of maximum leverage and we used it.

To be clear, if Labor had offered us nothing then we would have told them to go jump. It got to a stage where, basically, we said billions more or we walk. And we got it: \$3 billion is nothing to sneeze at.

The most broad sort of feedback we got door knocking was that no one really believed Labor's attacks.

But what a lot of people thought — I think especially the less politically engaged people — was: "Hold out for as long as you can and get as much as you can, but then eventually you need to get something because I can see homeless people on the street or in tents". So they appreciated our

position of holding out.

But did we have the social consensus to say “rent freeze or we are going to vote the bill down”? That was not clear.

There was another key component of people who understood that [in] this fight ... on one side there was the Greens saying the housing system is broken and we need some fundamental shifts in the way it works, like a rent freeze, scrapping negative gearing; and that tinkering around the edges is not going to work and gambling \$10 billion on the stock market is not going to work.

And then you have Labor basically defending the position of the banks and landlords.

There were people who just wanted us to wreck the joint, in the sense of just voting everything down until we get what we need.

To be frank, negotiating with Labor was like negotiating with the real estate or banking industry. We were basically having an argument with the political wing of the banking and property industry.

Some people might say, “Well, there is no way you can deal with them and actually our job is just to build up so much social power that eventually we replace them”.

I think that highlights that there is always going to be a tension around our role and function in parliament vis a vis building our movement on the ground.

In what position did this leave the Greens in terms of continuing the campaign for rent freezes?

When we came out of that fight, we did not see that as losing leverage; we saw it as laying a foundation.

We came out with hundreds more trained volunteers and organisers. Winning \$3 billion more for housing proved to our volunteer base that their activity can get actual material wins and thus built confidence among our organisers and supporters.

We also forced the national cabinet to reach an agreement that there was going to be a national plan for renters. We won public support for a rent freeze after 12 months of arguing for it.

Now 74% of the country supports a freeze on rent increases, including 58% of Coalition voters. This is a foundation in terms of where to go from here.

One of the good things is that we have shifted is public recognition that the Greens’ role is not just to rubber stamp Labor bills, regardless of what they are.

What we have won is consent that, actually, it is fair for the Greens to hold out until they get something real and material out of Labor.

So, for us, we feel like going into the next negotiation on the next housing bill, we’re in an even stronger position.

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