

I thank the Committee for inviting me to give evidence today, and for holding this much-needed inquiry.

It has now been almost 5 years since my family finalised our compulsory acquisition, and I still find it very hard to relive what we went through. It really was that traumatic, and I know the Committee has heard from many others who also found the process to be brutal. It should go without saying that a government should not treat its citizens in that way.

I believe many of the issues with the current system lie in the huge imbalance in negotiating power that exists between the person whose property is being acquired, and the government agency acquiring it.

The impact of this can be seen in the consistent and extreme 'lowballing' of offers made to people whose properties are being acquired for transport projects. This happened to my family and many others in my community, and there is an urgent need for further legislative reform to level this playing field, so that people whose properties are being acquired are treated fairly and compassionately.

Introducing a truly independent mediation service with the power to make acquiring agencies genuinely negotiate early in the process would help, as would providing people with the upfront funding they need to access legal advice and support.

Residents should also be offered 'reinstatement value', so they receive enough compensation to buy a similar property in their community.

As well as legislative reforms, there is also a need for deep cultural change in the way the NSW Government and its associated agencies approach compulsory acquisitions.

Back in 2016, when the last reforms to the Just Terms Act were introduced, I was a spokesperson for the WestConnex Action Group. I said back then that there didn't seem to be anything in the reforms to stop government agencies making people fight for their entitlements, and that unless that culture changed, the reforms would be meaningless.

It's clear from the evidence given to this Inquiry by people who've gone through the acquisition process since then that this is still an enormous issue. People are still having to fight for their entitlements, and suffering significant financial and emotional trauma as a result. I encourage the Committee to look at how the government can reform the culture that allows this to happen, as well as the laws that enable it.

I have also noted my concerns with the way properties were acquired for the WestConnex project well before planning approvals were granted, as well as the lack of compensation for substratum acquisitions, and I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have about those points as well.

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