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Max Chandler-Mather, publicity hound with a nose for the kill, is winning on housing

The Greens housing spokesman has rattled the PM and his government, but the newbie shows no signs of being overawed.

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JUL 03, 2023

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GREENS MP MAX CHANDLER-MATHER (IMAGE: AAP/LUKAS COCH)

The Greens and Labor are not getting on. “What’s new?” you may ask. Animus between the two is nothing novel. But relations have sunk to new lows recently. At issue is housing policy, especially the Greens’ decision to block Labor’s \$10 billion housing policy centrepiece. Matters came to a head in the final week of Parliament before the winter recess, with Housing Minister Julie Collins, backed by Labor backbenchers, launching attacks on the Greens for delaying the vote in the Senate. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Greens housing spokesman Max Chandler-Mather exchanged words on the floor of the house. The government even made veiled threats about a double dissolution.



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Why is the government so grumpy? The relatively noble aims of its policy help explain some of its anger at what it sees as Greens' grandstanding. The policy's \$10 billion fund is meant to stimulate affordable housing, even if it is in a few years. While the Greens point to market failure, the policy is planned to deliver social housing through not-for-profits such as housing associations. It will also support emergency housing for victims of family violence, and housing repair and maintenance for remote First Nations communities.

Chandler-Mather also seems to get under Labor's skin. He has an undoubted talent for publicity. Something about his fresh face and glib media presentation — scarcely unusual traits for an up-and-coming politician — make him a particular target for Labor criticism.

Labor is broadly correct to argue that blocking the housing fund policy will crimp future social housing supply, compared with the status quo. The government is also right to point out that the Greens' policy of capping rents won't increase housing supply (and could even hurt it).

But many of Labor's attacks are overblown. Collins, for instance, has been running the line that every day the Greens don't pass the bill is a delay in increasing housing supply.

"Every day of delay is more than \$1.3 million that does not go to housing for people that need it", [she said in June](#). This doesn't make a lot of sense, because it will not dribble funding out daily. In any case, even if billions were delivered tomorrow, housing construction would take some time to begin.

In policy terms, the Greens are surely right to point to the manifest flaws in the funding model. At the heart of their criticism is the [overly complex structure of the fund](#), which will channel public funds into an investment vehicle that will then generate returns for housing investment. The Greens very reasonably have asked why the government, sitting on a large and growing surplus, can't simply fund housing out of the budget.

Labor has never had a satisfactory answer to this, probably because, as economist John Quiggin argues, [there isn't one](#). As he wrote on his blog in 2021:



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To the extent that the hypothecation is genuine, it means that the money available for social housing depends on the performance of the sharemarket. And this dependence is the wrong way around. The case for public spending on social housing is strongest, both in terms of need and the availability of resources, when the economy and the share market are doing badly.

Indeed, the government appears to tacitly acknowledge this, because it has announced an [extra \\$2 billion for social housing](#), to be spent immediately across the states and territories.

There might be another reason the government is finding Chandler-Mather so irritating. He's winning. In his short time in Parliament, he has almost single-handedly dragged the housing debate in Australia well to the left. He's done it by championing the interests of one of the fastest-growing, but least influential, segments of the Australian electorate: renters.

The Greens have noticed something important about Australian politics. A new and increasingly important voting demographic is rising: middle-class renters. Thirty-somethings with kids used to be the sort of voters that a former PM, John Howard, called "aspirational". In the 1990s, the Coalition won big with policies that favoured homeowners and those keen to buy homes.

A generation of asset price inflation has radically changed the electoral landscape. The rapid inflation in housing prices since then has put homeownership out of reach, even for double-income couples in white-collar professions. Many now rent.

According to the authoritative [Australian Election Study](#), just 26% of renters voted for the Coalition in 2022.

While Labor will be loathed to admit it, Chandler-Mather's full-throated defence of renters has cut through. In part, this is because of the depth of the housing and homelessness crisis. But it is also because he is prepared to sharpen class rhetoric against landlords, a class of Australians that is widely seen to be profiting from the misery of tenants.



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The grinding injustice of renting is the underlying social condition that gives the housing debate its teeth. As I've argued before, [renting in Australia is hell](#). Despite some modest reforms to tenancy laws in some states and territories, most tenants are still treated more or less like lineal inheritors of medieval serfdom. With the average private tenancy lasting just 12 months, renters enjoy little security and possess few rights to enforce even basic maintenance or repairs.

As [Paul Karp noted perceptively](#) in *Guardian Australia* last week, the stoush on housing has played well for the smaller party: "With three times as many renters as Greens voters in Australia the rental class conflict is all upside for them, and all downside for Labor." As the housing crisis deepens, the terrain moves further in the Greens' favour.

The much-ballyhooed "[Overton window](#)" is an insider phrase often misused in political commentary. In a technical sense, it simply means the acceptable spectrum of political debate. But the Greens *have* moved the Overton window on housing policy, much to the discomfort of the government.

As [Chandler-Mather claimed](#) in February in the socialist masthead *Jacobin* — much to Albanese's displeasure — "by refusing to pass Labor's housing plan without even a debate, the Greens forced a national discussion about large-scale investment in public housing and a rent freeze".

For a generation, housing policy in Australia has been about showering tax concessions on property owners, while politicians mumbled incoherently about affordability. In little more than a year since the federal election, the Greens have moved the terms of the housing debate from mealy-mouthed platitudes about housing supply to a sharp-edged debate about rent controls.

Have the Greens oversimplified the housing debate? Or is Max Chandler-Mather on the right track? Let us know by writing to letters@crikey.com.au. Please include your full name to be considered for publication. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

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