The State as Employer and Landlord: State-Owned Company Housing in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract
Alongside the history of public housing in Aotearoa runs a less well-documented history of rental housing provided by the state not as a welfare measure but to its employees—including teachers, police officers, soldiers, miners, loggers, railways workers, construction workers, and civil servants. Rather than being developed side by side, public housing and employee housing often competed for scarce funding and resources and an overburdened construction workforce. Both when these two forms of state rental housing were established and when they were wound down, public and political support was sharply polarised, and their competing demands were used as wedge issues by political parties to undermine the housing priorities of their opponents. This paper considers how the state has navigated the competing political and economic demands stemming from its simultaneous roles as employer, landlord, regulator, and welfare provider.

Introduction

In the context of an ongoing housing crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand, there have been repeated suggestions that state institutions should provide affordable accommodation to its employees—particularly teachers.[1] The demands on the state to provide housing to its employees as well as public housing to its citizens speaks to an extensive history shared by these two interventions.

The history of public housing in New Zealand, at least as a welfare measure, has been well documented.[2] After fragmented and piecemeal interventions in the housing market at the turn of the twentieth century, the election of the First Labour Government (1935-1949) saw the establishment of an ambitious state-rental housing programme. This public housing system was maintained throughout the post-war decades—albeit redirected to cater to an increasingly residual and marginalised population—before undergoing a period of retrenchment in the 1990s.[3] The early decades of the twenty-first century, in turn, have seen sustained reforms to public and social housing provision.[4]

Less extensively researched have been those instances where the state has provided rental housing not as a welfare measure but as an employment benefit. As early as the 1860s, provincial governments were providing housing to schoolteachers, and by the 1870s the Railways Department began building housing—and later, entire suburbs—for its employees. Alongside the development of the public housing system from the 1930s onwards, an extensive portfolio was built up of rental properties for state employees—including teachers, police officers, soldiers, miners, loggers, railway workers, construction workers, and civil servants. Rather than being developed side by side, however, public housing and employee housing often competed for scarce funding, resources, and an overburdened construction workforce. At the critical junctures when these two forms of state rental housing were established and then wound down, public and political support for both interventions was polarised, and their competing demands were used as wedge issues by political parties to undermine their opponents' housing priorities.

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Employer-provided housing or company housing is riven with complex power dynamics, and is overdetermined by a range of political and economic logics influencing the actions both of companies/landlords and employees/tenants.[5] On the one hand, employer-housing, particularly when provided at below-market rates, may reduce workers' housing costs. In this way, the provision of housing can attract a mobile workforce to locations where housing is non-existent or unaffordable—whether in isolated rural areas or in cities suffering from housing shortages. On the other hand, by directly tying workers' housing to their employment, it reinforces power imbalances and effectively deprives workers of autonomy.[6] This is exacerbated when it comes to 'company towns', such as the hydro- and forestry towns operated by the NZ Forest Service or the Ministry of Works (MOW).[7] With the state's involvement, these dynamics become even more politicised.

Public housing in New Zealand has often been the subject of intense political antagonisms of its own, and sits at the convergence of a complex set of electoral incentives and competing social and financial interests. The political and economic pressures surrounding public housing and employer housing have both been explored in some depth in the international literature.[8] The intersection of these two logics, however—where company housing is state-owned—remains under-explored.

This paper begins by piecing together a brief 'alternative' history of public housing in New Zealand—focusing on housing provided by the state to its employees. After tracing the growing, and later diminishing, role of the state as housing provider for its employees, it draws on a series of Official Information Act (OIA) requests to all Public Service Departments, State Services organisations outside the core public service, State Owned Enterprises, and Crown Entities—from January to April 2025—to outline the current condition of the state's rental property portfolio.[9] It explores the policy-frameworks in place for navigating this dual role as employer and landlord to conceptualise the political and economic logics faced by the state in operating this class of housing.

The Railways Department as the State's Construction Arm

The most prominent early example of state-employer housing is the construction of houses for employees of the New Zealand Railways Department, particularly in isolated rural settlements, as early as the 1880s.[10] Most of these had "been built by the Public Works Department at the time the railway lines were being constructed",[11] but the programme was expanded significantly in response to a post-World War I housing shortage. As the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS)—the largest trade union in New Zealand in the 1910s and 1920s, alongside the Railways Department as the largest employer[12]—wrote to Richard McVilly, the General Manager of the Railways Department: "hundreds of men have gone out of the service rather than transfer. They refuse to take their wives to Wellington, Palmerston North or Frankton Jct. owing to the housing question".[13] Echoing this, McVilly wrote to the Prime Minister and Minister of Railways that the Department had…

> been greatly hampered in connection with its staffing arrangements by the difficulties of the staff in securing house accommodation. As a consequence of the shortage of houses the Department is compelled to spend large sums in transfer expenses annually, and the railway staff is disinclined to accept transfers to meet the requirements of the Department.[14]

Estimating that 1200 additional units were required to house its employees, and in the context of post-war shortages of labour and construction materials, the department began investing

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heavily in its in-house construction infrastructure.[15] In 1920, it began building a second timber mill at Mamaku "to process wood from its own forests", and "prefabrication and joinery factories at Frankton", including a capacity for manufacturing sinks, baths, and pipes.[16] Through mass-prefabrication and its vertically integrated supply lines, the department managed to reduce the cost of each house from £971 in 1920 to £635 in 1926—significantly cheaper than housing financed by the State Advances Department.[17] By 1921, the Railways Architectural Branch reported having completed 140 houses, as well as "2 Stores, 1 Stable, 9 Railway Huts, 1 Addition to office building, 1 Large Hostel for Single Men, 1 Large House Building Factory, [and] 1 Band Sawmill",[18] and would go on to build 2000 houses by 1926.[19]

As a response to workforce issues, the Railways' housing programme was influenced both by a paternalistic logic of care and economic rationalities, insofar as good living and working conditions were required to attract and maintain staff. In a meeting with the ASRS, McVilly argued that "what we going to do is give satisfaction to our staff, and that is worth a lot: but it is not going to be a huge profit-making machine".[20] The Minister of Railways noted that the relatively low "weekly rental based on one day's pay" could be maintained partly because the housing programme saved the Railways "approximately £10.000 per annum" in "transfer expenses".[21] A financial review by the Railways Commission during the Depression, however, recommended an austerity programme which included a rent increase.[22] As Shalders notes:

> From 1 February 1931 rents were increased as recommended by the Commission. To achieve the desired 33.3% increase in total revenue a base rate of nine and a half pence per square foot was established. This was then increased or decreased depending on the grade and location of each house.[23]

The scale of the Railway Department's housing programme meant that it could consider housing as a major source of revenue. The blurring of boundaries between employment and living conditions, however, meant that rents became a bargaining chip in collective bargaining negotiations. By the end of 1934, negotiations with the union resulted in a settlement reducing the rents on Railways housing.

Beyond disputes about rent, we can observe a blurring of boundaries between work- and home-life insofar as the Railways Department "attempted to involve itself in the working and non-working lives of its employees, from cultural products to equipment which was allowed in the dwellings"—providing guidance on subjects ranging from cleanliness, nutrition, and how to brew tea or coffee, to personal finances.[24] Reflecting a broader biopolitical vision, this was aimed particularly at single male employees living in railway cabins, while married male employees were eligible for cottages.[25]

With J.G. Coates as Prime Minister and Minister of Railways from 1925-1928, the Railways Department "became increasingly interested in the production of cheap prefabricated housing" at a nationwide scale, and began constructing houses for the private market.[26] Coates "envisaged a massive government input into house construction", to be led by the Railways Department.[27] Coates was by no means a supporter of state rental housing, having been an opponent of the Liberal government's (1891-1912) Workers' Dwellings scheme, and as such the Railways Department's involvement in the housing market would be as builder rather than social landlord. In contrast to the (liberal) welfarist model of the Workers' Dwellings, this resembles a more corporatist vision of housing policy.[28]

In 1925, the Railways Department was brought in to support the Hutt Valley Land Settlement Act—essentially functioning as the state's construction arm to develop a garden suburb, industrial estate, and community services.[29] Three hundred houses were prefabricated in the Frankton factory and built in Lower Hutt to be sold at low interest rates to "people who did not meet the lending criteria for the government's State Advances Department, the main provider of housing finance".[30] By 1928, under pressure from the timber and construction industries, the newly-elected United Government (1928-1931) ended the scheme.[31] A year later, in 1929, the Frankton factory was closed down abruptly after having constructed 1380 houses.[32] As Roche notes, this has often been presented as a political victory for the private construction sector, but the Railways Department framed the scheme's end as a result of successfully "having… met its housing requirements".[33]

The Railways Department housing scheme was the only example of 'socialised' housing construction in New Zealand.[34] Even the First Labour Government—discussed in the next section—would rely on private enterprise, rather than the state, to build public housing. After Labour's election in 1935, it briefly considered re-activating the Railways Department as the state's construction arm, but by then its factory in Frankton been shuttered and the factory's equipment had been sold.[35] "The other [public] option, the Public Works Department was, according to [Prime Minister] Savage, incapable of building a fowlhouse".[36]

Housing for Employees and/or Citizens

While less extensive than Railway housing, state institutions had been providing accommodation to teachers and police officers as early as the 1860s, particularly in rural districts.[37] By the 1930s and 40s, however, much of the school-housing stock was ageing and run-down. Teachers' residences were in "a deplorable condition, something that had been growing for years".[38] "Like school houses and schools," Peter Fraser, then Prime Minister, noted in 1946, many of the "houses for police… were in a disgraceful state". The houses, he continued, "were built as the country developed, fifty to eighty years ago, and… required renovation at the same time, causing greater difficulties".[39]

Given the broader context of the depression-era housing crisis and overcrowding in inner-city slums, housing became one of the First Labour Government's main priorities. Blaming market failure for this situation, Labour argued that greater intervention in the housing market was necessary. The "centrepiece" of their housing policy was revealed in the 1936 Budget, which called for 5,000 state houses to be built.[40] The suggestion to re-activate the construction programme of the Railways Department suggests that the First Labour Government's confidence that it could build cheap, high quality housing at scale was inspired, to some extent, by the successful example of the railway houses.

Alongside state rental housing, the Labour government also began renovating the housing it provided to teachers and police officers, as well as constructing new housing for state employees. "The government is providing not only for people who want to own their own homes, but also for what I may call the migrant population—railway workers, school-teachers, and others, who are often transferred from place to place".[41]

Beyond housing construction, a much stricter framework of residential tenancy legislation was developed to protect renters. Through the Fair Rents Act 1936*,* rents were capped "at a proportion of the dwelling's capital value", and tenants were protected from eviction if determined that "the tenant would suffer greater hardship than the landlord".[42] As Schrader notes, "a miscellaneous measure in the *Finance Act 1937*" further stipulated that "tenants of dwellings subject to the *Fair Rents Act* could not be evicted unless equivalent accommodation was made available to them".[43]

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World War II significantly slowed the pace of state housing construction as resources were diverted to the war effort.[44] School housing construction suffered the same fate. The scarcity of labour, building materials, and finance, however, exposed the competing demands of state housing and state-employer housing. Looking "to avoid competition between government departments vying for the limited manpower and materials available", the autonomous construction capacity of different government departments was curtailed.[45] The Railways Department, for instance, was to cease its housing construction programme entirely in 1943, with this work being handed to the Housing Construction Division of the MOW.

This distinction between state housing and state-employer housing was accentuated by opposition MPs—arguing that the Labour Government's focus on state housing diverted funding and resources away from housing for the employees of state institutions, and prioritised urban and suburban housing shortages over rural ones. With a specific focus on teacher housing, which continued to be in short supply and of poor quality, state-employer housing became a wedge used by the National Party to challenge Labour's housing agenda.

Keith Holyoake, MP for Pahiatua and future Prime Minister, asked what the Ministry of Education was planning to do about the "serious matter" of "providing homes for school-teachers…, particularly in the country districts". He argued that the policy of providing housing only to the principal teacher in rural areas was inadequate, as many schools were facing situations where "because of a lack of accommodation, teachers who would otherwise have been eligible to apply to fill… [vacancies] refrained from doing so".[46] Debates in Parliament saw other National MPs urging the government to "take every possible step to see that good houses were provided for teachers in the country".[47]

Although the Minister of Education noted that the Government was investing heavily in the "building of new schools… the remodelling of old ones, and the building of teachers' residences" despite "all the obstructions raised by the war to every kind of building" project,[48] he admitted that there were "a sufficient number of demands having priority over" teacher housing. "With so many problems in the way of building schools and houses for head teachers, and with so little material and labour on hand," he argued, "there was little opportunity for considering the erection of houses for teachers other than head teachers".[49] As such, Labour would not look to expand the policy beyond providing "homes for the principal teachers outside the main centres".[50]

Beyond criticising the Government's construction priorities, National MPs used teacher housing to push back against the Fair Rents Act—claiming that it was "working against the country's interest".[51] When many teachers had enlisted at the start of the war, women took up many vacated teaching positions. Teacher housing, at this point, was provided only to married male teachers—unmarried teachers were expected to board, while married female teachers were not thought to need a house, as this should be provided by their husbands. "As these women could not occupy the school residences, they were let" to the public, leading to 301 school houses being tenanted by "non teacher occupants".[52] With teachers returning from the war, schools could not regain possession of these houses, as the tenants were protected by the Fair Rents Act.

Several National MPs pushed for school houses to be exempted from the Fair Rents Act, which would allow school boards to evict non-teacher tenants.[53] As soon as the Minister of Education replied that "consideration will be given as to what steps are necessary to enable full control to be retained of residences vested in Education Boards for school purposes”,[54] National MPs sought to broaden the scope of any potential exemption, and responded bitterly when this was rejected. “From the Minister’s reply it was clear that they wanted to look after their own interests and did not want the general taxpayer or returned servicemen to have similar privileges or rights”.[55]

Teacher housing subsequently became an important “plank in the National party’s policy” in the 1949 election.[56] Upon their election, the First National Government (1949-1957) reversed Labour’s prioritisation of state housing over teacher housing. The construction of school houses for married male teachers and hostel accommodation for female teachers more than tripled during their first term in office.[57] The entitlement to housing was enshrined in statute “for married head teachers and sole teachers of rural primary and Maori schools where rented houses are not available”.[58] Beyond specified teacher housing, the Public Service Commission Housing Bureau would assist teachers to find accommodation through the ‘pool’ housing scheme,[59] which provided housing for “government employees on transfer and those who are expecting to remain for short periods of time”.[60]

In contrast to this focus on teacher housing—part of what one Labour MP referred to as a hypocritical claim by the Government of being a “model employer”—public housing was deprioritised.[61] Funding for public housing provision was redirected towards “homeownership as a welfare good”, with the state selling off almost 30% of existing state houses at well-below market rates and beginning to develop an ‘asset-based welfare system’ providing mortgages and subsidies to encourage homeownership.[62] Reflecting the distinction between Seddon’s Workers’ Dwellings Scheme and Coates’ Railway Housing Scheme, this can be interpreted as a shift from a welfarist to a more corporatist approach to the state’s involvement in housing provision.

State-Owned Company Towns

Throughout the post-war decades, many government departments began providing housing for their employees, and the stock of ‘pool’ houses expanded rapidly.[63] During this period, we also see the development of towns where most available housing was rented out by the state. In some cases, this was public housing, such as in Porirua, where, in 1966, almost three-quarters of residents lived in housing owned by the state.[64] Forestry- and hydro-towns, in turn, were instead characterised by large concentrations of state-owned employer housing.[65] Given the isolation of these ‘single industry’ towns and their dependence on a dominant employer—and, in the case of hydro-towns, their temporary nature—such state-owned company towns accentuated the complexities of the relationships between employer/landlord and employee/tenant.

Beginning with the 1919 Lake Coleridge scheme, the New Zealand state invested heavily in the damming of rivers and the construction of hydroelectric power-stations throughout the 20th century.[66] By necessity, hydro-development took place in “remote areas, which [had] not been developed and settled to the extent of rendering the creation of large artificial lakes impracticable”.[67] The camps initially built to house the construction workforce consisted largely of spartan facilities and accommodation.[68] Due to a post-war labour shortage, however, improved housing conditions and cheap or non-existent rents were necessary to attract workers.[69] This saw public works camps consisting of canvas tents develop into ‘construction towns’ operated by MOW. The majority of these hydro-towns were intended to be temporary, lasting only until a project was completed, with many hydro-workers migrating from one construction project to the next—"for example, from Karapiro to Mangakino … and Turangi; from Otematata to Twizel and Cromwell; and from Manapouri to Cromwell".[70]

Forestry towns, by contrast, were largely planned 'new towns', intended to be permanent (Chapman 1960; Chapple 1975). The State Forest Service had planted large areas of pine forest in the Central North Island during the 1920s and 1930s, and the development of forestry towns for the exploitation of timber accelerated from the early 1950s.[71] The builders brought in to construct these towns lived largely in camps, which were often maintained even after construction was completed to provide accommodation for single workers. Unlike their married colleagues, they were provided with huts rather than houses, and the single men's camps would remain spatially isolated from the towns. Most forestry towns would be dominated by one or two employers. In some cases, such as Tokoroa or Kawerau, these were private companies—although in Kawerau the Tasman Pulp and Paper Co. worked closely with the state—while in others, such as Kaingaroa, Tapanui, and Murupara, the Forest Service was the main employer.[72]

Like hydro-towns, most "major industrial plants for processing of forestry products [were] located in inaccessible areas lacking housing and other community facilities… As a result the industry [was] obliged to provide a fully serviced community" to attract workers.[73] Forestry towns were usually built from the ground up, leading to the industry owning most or all the available housing. In Kaingaroa, Tapanui, and Murupara, most of the housing was built by the state—with the entire population of Kaingaroa in 1960 living in state-owned houses.[74] Even in many privately-operated forestry towns, the state was actively involved. By 1960, two thirds housing in Kawerau was constructed by MOW, and another fifth by the Tasman Pulp and Paper Co., although Tasman was the 'master tenant' of most of the state-owned houses.[75] Despite gradually selling housing to employees, the employer often remained the dominant, if not the only, provider of rental housing.[76]

Being both the dominant employer and landlord meant that the state—in the guise of the Forest Service in forestry towns and MOW in hydro-towns—had significant control over economic and social life. To be attractive to workers, most state-owned company towns were characterised by comparatively high wages and low rents. In Tapanui, for example, only 10% of residents paid more than $25 a week in rent in 1981, whereas nationally, 61% of rental households paid more than $25 per week.[77] However, these benefits often put women in a difficult position. The lack of job opportunities for women in state-owned company towns meant that a) men generally held the tenancy through their employment, and b) while men had higher incomes than the national average, women were more economically disadvantaged.[78] Personal and familial relationships, in this way, fell under the broad control of the state—with difficulties arising in some hydro-towns around "de facto couples, whom the MWD" (the Ministry of Works and Development, rebranded from the Ministry of Works in 1974) "refused to recognize as 'married' for the purpose of housing allocation".[79]

For (male) employees, being provided housing by one's employer was a mixed blessing. The state's dual role as employer and landlord heavily impacted tenure stability, as the relationship between housing and employment meant that losing one implied losing the other. As Chapple noted:

> "... the resident must conform to certain rules which he has no part in formulating... Infringement of the only set of tenancy obligations available to him may mean eviction, the loss of a job and enforced migration. Or conversely, if he loses his job

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> (even if not dishonourably) he will lose the security of the house and again be forced to migrate".[80]

These 'rules' of the tenancy were often driven by ulterior motives, and failed to reflect tenant/workers' interests. In Twizel, for example, single workers were not permitted to "rent houses unless special circumstances applied. This rule was designed to keep the hostels and caterers in business. For the same reason, too, workers were not permitted to cook meals in their rooms".[81] In many of the forestry camps, similarly, "no additional fittings [were] allowed in the men's rooms" beyond the basic chattels provided, "and women [were] excluded from the accommodation areas".[82] As McClintock and Taylor write, state/employer control was particularly pervasive "in the smaller forestry settlements" during the early development of the town, with local democracy being largely non-existent. For example, in Kaingaroa in the 1960s, "the Officer--in-Charge of the Forest acted or arbitrated on complaints concerning dwellings, trespass, noise and the safety of residents."[83]

Through housing, company control extended into employees' home-lives—blurring the boundaries between work and community. More generally, social control extended to the ways in which the Forest Service and MOW/MWD shaped patterns of urban development. Many forestry and hydro-towns were characterised by spatial segregation— both between single men and the rest of the community, and between management staff and wage-workers. Despite many forestry towns being more ethnically and culturally diverse than the general population,[84] occupational hierarchies meant that, in practice, they displayed significant class- and ethnic-segregation. Although later admitting that this was a mistake[85]—with both the Forest Service and MOW/MWD looking to integrate communities by interspersing the housing of management staff throughout the towns—the capacity of state employers to shape towns' physical and social structures highlights the extent of their influence.

As noted, hydro-towns were often intended to be temporary, yet there were always political problems surrounding their dissolution. As hydro-construction projects were wound down, many towns were disestablished entirely. Those that remained often struggled to survive, with the town's economic viability disappearing along with the state employer. This was apparent, for example, in Mangakino, Tūrangi, and Twizel, although all three ultimately transitioned to holiday and tourist-oriented communities. In all these cases, the population would initially plummet, as would house prices, to the disadvantage of those who had bought their house, and an economic base capable of supporting the community had to be established, along with systems of local government to take over MWD's administrative role. Moreover, many of the houses left behind—never intended to be permanent dwellings, and often made to be relocatable—did not conform to local building codes and were usually of low quality (even more so in Mangakino than in Tūrangi and Twizel).[86] Many of these problems were the direct consequence of the conflicting motivations of building temporary towns. On the one hand, the lack of amenities characteristic of temporary towns would "militate against the quality of life experienced by those who must live there", while "the provision of special amenities and services for the residents [could] increase the project cost… and foster a false sense of permanence".[87]

Unlike the hydro-towns, many of the forestry towns were meant to be permanent. Nonetheless, as this next section discusses, many were decimated when the state sought to divest itself from state-owned industry, as well as from the housing it provided to its employees. The state's retrenchment from rural industries—and particularly the closing of the Forest Service—had similarly devastating impacts on communities such as Minginui and Murupara.[88]

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The Privatisation of State-Employer Housing

Where in the 1940s, the National Party pushed back against the Labour Government's welfarist housing agenda to establish a more corporatist housing system, the 1980s saw this process play out in reverse. Under the Fourth Labour Government (1984-1990), New Zealand rapidly deregulated its economy and privatised state-owned industries.[89] Regarding public housing, the Treasury advised the Labour Government that it saw "little need for any state enterprise to provide rental accommodation or lending services," advocating for housing to be left to the private sector.[90] This was rejected by the Labour Government, which considered housing a valuable social good. It would not be until 1991, following the election of the Fourth National Government (1990-1999), that public housing was targeted for market reforms.[91]

That said, the state-owned employer-housing stock was not exempt from the Labour Government's efforts to extricate the state from the market. In 1982, when still in opposition, Labour's Housing Spokesperson requested information from different government departments regarding the amount of housing they oversaw, as well as how many of these were untenanted and how long they would sit empty between tenants (Fig. 1)—trying to highlight the inefficiency of the state's employer-housing portfolio. These data provides a snapshot of the state-employer housing stock that had been built up in the post-war decades—coming to a total of 17,469 houses, almost a third of the size of the state housing portfolio, which numbered 57,547 houses in 1985.[92]

Government Department	Number of Houses Controlled in 1982
Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries	366
Rural Banking and Finance Corporation	0
State Services Commission	0
Ministry of Energy	1,744 - 1435 Electricity Division - 309 Mines Division
Department of Labour	0
Department of Transport	278
Railways Department	3,740
Ministry of Justice	779
Department of Social Welfare	114
Department of Education	3,854
Department of Māori Affairs	0
Department of Lands and Survey	0
Ministry of Works and Development	3,281
New Zealand Defence Force	3,313*
Total	17,469

Fig. 1: Rental housing controlled by Government Departments in 1982.[93] Data for the Forest Service is unavailable. The NZDF figure represents residential properties owned in 1983.[94]

Most of the housing provided to state employees was operating at a loss—with rents being negotiated as part of collective employment agreements, and generally charging cost-rentals averaged across the total housing stock. This fell significantly below market rates. After being elected in 1984, the Labour Government began reviewing housing policies for state employees

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en masse, with considerable initial pushback from National MPs. Being considered financially unviable, state-owned employer-provided housing was reorganised following market logics. As of 1986, teachers who were renting school-housing paid $15.54 per week in rural areas and $26.38 in urban areas—equating to 3% of the capital valuation of rural houses and 4.5% of urban houses.[95] Rural police housing similarly charged below-market rentals—at $23.00 per week in 1988.[96] The introduction of market rentals saw rents increase to reflect local market conditions rather than maintenance costs. Rent increases varied significantly across regions, but were universally significant—in Kaitaia, for example, teachers' rents were revised upwards to $80 per week.[97]

After the introduction of market rent for state-employer housing, the Government sought to drastically reduce the amount of housing it provided to teachers. This included selling:

> selected houses in cities an*d* other large centres of population; houses in former 'country service' areas which now exceed 6000 population; houses in areas of less than 6000 population where there is an adequate supply of other *houses* for rental or purchase; [and] houses not occupied by teachers… regardless of location.[98]

While this privatisation was underway, the Department of Education did continue to expand its housing stock, albeit not for teachers. Throughout the 1980s, caretakers' houses were built at many schools—particularly in Auckland—to reduce vandalism and arson on school property.[99]

This process of privatisation was not limited to teacher housing. In a broader divestment from industrial and commercial activities, the forestry, energy, and railway sectors were restructured as State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) charged with making a profit.[100] Over the course of Labour's tenure, however, it was increasingly suspected that "the SOE structure might only incorporate the worst of the public and private sectors and that the justifications for corporatisation in many cases applied equally well to privatisation".[101] Consequently, state-operated industries were dismembered and privatised, with much of the housing stock sold or demolished.

The Forest Service was restructured into several different organisations—the Ministry of Forestry to administer policy, the Department of Conservation, and the New Zealand Forestry Corporation, an SOE which would carry out the commercial activities of the Forest Service, and which was disestablished in 1991.[102] The Forestry Corporation would also be "responsible for the management of houses"—providing security of tenancy to existing "occupants for 13 months from 1 March 1988" and giving tenants "the first right of refusal to purchase" if the corporation sought to sell any houses".[103]

The Railways Department had been corporatised as the New Zealand Railways Corporation in 1982, with the intention to make it a commercially viable operation. The Corporation announced in 1988 that rents would be increased to market level as a short-term measure until the housing could be sold.[104] The initial plan was to offer tenants the opportunity to buy their houses, allowing railways employees to purchase other vacant properties, and then selling any remaining houses on the open market.[105] In reality, this proved difficult because many of the houses did not have individual titles but were on Railways land, and would have taken significant work to subdivide.[106] Privatisation was sped up through the secretive sale of the last 1426 houses to a private investment company, Stone Key Investments—with the Railways Corporation keeping the land underneath the houses.[107]

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Many of the state-employer houses which could not be sold—such as those provided to Energy Department employees at Cobb Power station, which were too remote for "prospective house purchasers or tenants" and to be "removed in sufficiently large sections to enable them to be rebuilt in other location"—were demolished.[108]

The National opposition pushed back against the sale of these houses—highlighting in parliamentary debates how this would impact teachers, police officers, miners, and railway and forestry workers. The Labour Government framed this as largely cynical. As the Minister of Health argued:

> Would they have received that treatment from a National Government, or any private enterprise? Not on your sweet nelly!... Do members know of any private organisation, or of anything the previous Government ever reconstructed, that was so generous? Not on your life!… It would have taken none of those measures; it would have sent people down the road without a penny.[109]

The suggestion that National's protestations were not in good faith was born out to some extent, as National continued the privatisation drive after replacing Labour in government in 1990. The Fourth National Government used a similar playbook by introducing market-rents—this time for state housing—restructuring the Housing Corporation as a commercial enterprise charged with turning a profit, and privatising the state housing stock.[110]

The privatisation of both state housing and state-employer housing continued into the early 2000s. By 2001 there were approximately 2600 school houses remaining—1200 fewer than twenty years before, and 1200 more than twenty years later. The Fifth Labour Government (1999-2008) conducted a review of school houses in 2002/03, and found that "approximately 30% of houses at any one time were privately tenanted or vacant, rentals were about 50% of market rates and 50% of housing was located in urban or semi-urban centres".[111] Given that the "portfolio performed poorly," the provision of school housing was restructured.[112] A distinction was drawn between non-core houses, core houses, and caretaker houses—with the ministry managing, and eventually disposing of, non-core houses, and School Boards overseeing core housing and caretaker housing. Core houses were opened up to non-teacher tenancies, while non-core houses would no longer be made available to teachers—instead being let on the private market.[113] The remaining stock has continued to be sold, albeit at a slower pace, over the early decades of the 21st century.

Managing the Leftovers

In the wake of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the number of rental houses provided by government departments to their employees is much diminished. The departmental rental stock has been scattered—with some sold directly to employees or the wider public, some transferred to private companies along with state owned enterprises as they were privatised, some demolished, and some transferred to the Treaty Settlements Landbank to eventually be returned to iwi and hapu.[114] Nonetheless, a small amount of rental housing for employees is maintained by government departments (Fig. 2). From a total of 17,469 state-employer houses in 1982, by 2025 there were 4,254 remaining, with another 302 leased and sublet.

Most of the state's provision of accommodation to its employees today functions on an 'as needed' basis, rather than providing primary residences. Most government departments reimburse travel expenses when employees travel for work, and source short-term accommodation from the private sector for employees who are seconded to different locations

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for a short period of time. This takes several different forms. For example, Kiwirail "will arrange accommodation for [its] employees when they are required to work out of their normal area for extended periods of time", such as when bringing "track workers up to Auckland for the summer 'block of line' works when [it] shut[s] the network over the Christmas holidays".[115] In another example, members of Parliament based outside Wellington are provided with funds for accommodation in Wellington.[116] Other departments own housing in remote locations which are temporarily used by seconded staff: the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI), for example, owns a house in the Chatham Islands; Customs have accommodation in Queenstown; the Airways Corporation owns a unit at Milford, and the NZ Antarctic Institute provides accommodation in Antarctica. In some cases, the accommodation provided is functions as the employees' place of work. Oranga Tamariki | Ministry for Children (OT) caregivers, for example, will live in homes owned by OT when caring for children, but this is not their primary residence.

Government Department	**Number of Houses Controlled**
Department of Conservation (DOC)	244
Department of Corrections (Corrections)	97
Department of the Prime Minster and Cabinet (DPMC)	2
Ministry of Education	1448 - 858 Core Houses - 394 Non-Core Houses - 177 Caretaker Houses
New Zealand Defence Force	1579 + 302 leased
New Zealand Police	243
Pāmu | Landcorp	500+
Fire and Emergency	26
Te Whatu Ora | Health New Zealand	109

Fig. 2: Rental housing controlled by Government Departments in 2025.

Accommodation is also available to government employees—specifically those working for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI), the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Customs, and NZ Trade and Enterprise—when they are posted or seconded abroad. For short-term deployments, accommodation is organised and paid for by the employer, while it is common practice for staff on longer term secondments to source their own rental accommodation, with their employer acting as a guarantor. Staff contribute to the cost of their accommodation at a rate calculated on Wellington market rents.

Beyond such short-term accommodation, state-owned employer-housing is provided to employees of four Public Service Departments (Department of Conservation (DOC), Corrections, DPMC, and the Ministry of Education), two State Services organisations outside the core public service (New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) and Police), one State Owned Enterprise (Pāmu), and two Crown Entities (Fire and Emergency and Te Whatu Ora). Some other departments, such as MBIE, allow for individual employees to negotiate accommodation clauses into their employment contracts, although this is considered uncommon.

For those organisations who only maintain a small stock of state-employer housing (DPMC, Corrections, Fire and Emergency, and Te Whatu Ora), these houses are largely incidental to their operations. This stands in contrast to the establishment of state-employer housing in the 20th century, when these houses were seen as "essential to [the] business operations" of government departments.[117] Running counter to the logic according to which they were first established, these departments are required by tax law, as are other employers, to rent out housing at market rates. DPMC, for example, rents out its two caretakers houses to employees at market rates—one at each of the Governor General's official residences. Moreover, the residential portfolios of these departments are not primarily used to house employees, and are largely rented on the open market. Fire and Emergency, for example, rent 4 out of their 26 houses to employees, Te Whatu Ora rent 16 out of their 109 houses to employees, and during 2023 and 2024, between 19% and 29% of the 97 houses owned by Corrections were rented to employees.

Reflecting discourses around efficiency which surrounded the retrenchment of state-employer housing, as well as the peripheral importance attributed to employer housing, the oversight of these houses is generally outsourced—sometimes through several layers of subcontractors. "The management of the properties" owned by Corrections, for example, "was assigned by the Department to Land Information New Zealand who in turn contract Colliers International as the property manager".[118]

The fact that a significant portion of these departments' residential housing portfolios are not used as employer housing suggests that it is no longer considered vital to their functioning. As Corrections noted, many of the conditions which initially led to the establishment of state-employer housing no longer pertain.[119] The Auckland Housing Village "on Paremoremo road opposite Auckland Prison… makes up the entirety of the Department's residential property portfolio". Once an isolated location "far from the residential suburbs of Auckland city", it is now proximate to the North Shore and many housing opportunities, meaning Corrections staff face fewer challenges finding accommodation near their workplace.[120]

By contrast, those departments which maintain significant stocks of state-employer housing tend to use it for its intended purpose—utilising it strategically to address staffing requirements. DOC, for example, provides a range of different housing and tenancy options across the houses, boarding houses, and hostels it operates—including permanent housing for employees in isolated locations, seasonal housing for employees, volunteers, or contractors, and short-term housing. Given that these houses serve a functional purpose within DOC's operations, rather than simply providing a source of income, "it is DOC policy that Departmental housing cannot be rented long term for holiday purposes or as private rentals to the public".[121] DOC housing, then, is not available on the open market, and consequently, is generally "offered as part of an employment agreement, or otherwise as an incident of a contract of service/contract for services".[122]

Similarly, "all Police Tenancy Agreements are Service Tenancy Agreements, meaning that they are connected to the employee's employment and may operate outside certain provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act, for example in respect of termination".[123] While New Zealand Police charges market rates for the housing they provide to regional constabulary, they sometimes provide temporary accommodation supports or concessionary rentals in situations where there is "an acute lack of suitable available housing, a limited or no active rental market, and/or difficulty in filling vacancies and retaining staff".[124]

State-employer housing provided by Pāmu follows a similar pattern of service tenancies at market rents. As an SOE, Pāmu manages 360,000 hectares of high-country sheep, deer, and cattle farms, and given their isolated locations, provides housing to on-farm staff. All houses provided "as part of employment are on service tenancies as per the accommodation clauses in the employment agreement".[125] They do not, however, provide cheap rentals as an additional benefit. "Each Pāmu house has a fair market rental value (MRV) calculated. MRVs for each house are determined by Pāmu using independent data and will vary depending on region, proximity to towns and services and quality of housing".[126] The main reason for charging market rents is that below-market rents are considered a form of taxable income, and "Inland Revenue requires Pāmu employees to pay tax on the market rental value of the house provided".[127]

School housing is an exception here, as the Ministry of Education calculates rents paid by teachers at 75% of market rent, although "private tenants pay full market rate". This arose out of negotiations with Inland Revenue (IRD), who, in 2003, "claimed that teachers were getting a tax benefit" after rents had remained unchanged for 10 years.[128] The IRD "recognised a benefit of 25% and gave a discount rate" to teachers paying concessionary rents. "The ministry now commissions" a private consultancy "to do an annual rent review for all teacher houses to ensure all teacher tenants are paying rentals in line with the IRD requirement that service tenancy rentals are struck at 75% of current market rentals. [The consultants] receive 6.45% of the rental income as a fee".[129]

Of the 1448 houses operated by School Boards and the Ministry of Education, only 858 are primarily available to teachers—the rest is either caretaker housing or is in the process of being sold. The perceived unimportance of this stock is underlined by the statement by the Ministry that "caretaker houses are not insured. If the house burns down, it probably won't be replaced".[130] The school housing stock, therefore, continues to shrink. At the same time, however, several schools have sought to acquire or develop housing to attract teachers.[131] Rather than rural areas, this has mostly been in cities where housing is least affordable—specifically Queenstown, Wānaka, and Auckland.

The Defence Force also provides below-market rents through negotiations with the IRD, but unlike the Ministry of Education, this 'tax discount' is entrenched in legislation. Following the Income Tax Act 2007,[132] "the NZDF national rent is negotiated between the IRD Commissioner and CDF".[133]

Where significant amounts of state-employer housing throughout the 20th century did not meet building standards, the housing provided by the state is—for the most part—no longer exempt from housing and tenancy regulations, including the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA) and Healthy Homes Standards. NZDF barracks are a prominent exception, as the NZDF does not enter into a tenancy agreement for the provision of barrack rooms.[134]

Beyond barracks accommodation, however, the NZDF owns 1579 houses—and, as of 2024, leased another 302 from private owners[135]—and "provides Defence housing, transit housing and welfare housing at camps and bases throughout New Zealand to accommodate eligible members of the NZDF and… members of the Civil Staff".[136] While these houses are required to meet minimum standards, many of them have "black mould, dampness and draughts", as well as being "too cold and not insulated properly".[137] The state has recognised that much of the Defence Housing stock is unfit for habitation—reporting that "there is minimal, or no, remaining useful life in the majority of assets. Many personnel are living and working in aged

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buildings unfit for purpose, with accelerated states of deterioration".[138] However, housing is clearly part of the Defence Force's future due to its highly mobile workforce. Opening new, "homely", and high-quality flats for soldiers, the NZDF described them as not only "a solution for what has been a challenging period for our soldiers with regards to accommodation, but also [...] a significant generational change in how we house our people."[139]

Conclusion

In this paper, we have traced the history of state-owned employer-provided housing in New Zealand to explore the complex political and economic pressures on the state surrounding its provision of housing both to its citizens and employees. As early as the 1860s, provincial governments provided housing to schoolteachers, and by the 1870s the Railways Department began building housing—and later, entire suburbs—for its employees and their families. Alongside the development of the state's public housing system from the 1930s onwards, an extensive portfolio was built up of rental properties for employees of the state—including teachers, police officers, soldiers, miners, loggers, railways workers, construction workers, and civil servants. State-employer housing went through similar developmental phases as public housing—establishment; construction; management; and retrenchment.[140]

Rather than being developed side by side, however, public housing and employee housing often competed for scarce funding and resources. At the critical junctures when these two forms of state rental housing were established and wound down, political support for both interventions was sharply polarised, and their competing demands were used by political parties to undermine their opponents' housing priorities.

As the First Labour Government embarked on its construction of state housing in the 1930s, opposition MPs argued that this diverted funding and resources away from housing for the employees of state institutions, and prioritised urban and suburban housing shortages over rural ones. With a specific focus on teacher housing, which continued to be in short supply and of poor quality, state-employer housing was repeatedly used by the National Party to push back against Labour's housing agenda. Throughout the 20th century, state provision of housing to its employees expanded rapidly. In the post-war years, many different government departments embraced this practice, and the stock of 'pool' houses grew rapidly. This suggests that alongside the welfarist model of social provision often used to describe mid-century New Zealand—what Esping-Andersen would call a liberal welfare regime—there existed a more corporatist vision of state intervention in the housing market.[141]

Despite these political divisions surrounding both the establishment and disestablishment of state housing and state-employer housing, it is important not to overstate the differences between National and Labour governments' approaches to these two tenure-forms. While state housing was the centrepiece of the First Labour Government's housing policy, this can be seen as emerging from the earlier success of railway housing. Furthermore, it did not neglect state-employer housing as much as opposition politicians suggested—investing heavily in the aging stock of school and police houses. Similarly, despite the First National Government's stated preference for housing teachers, it nonetheless continued to expand the state housing stock. The ideological and rhetorical division between National and Labour over state and state-employer housing resulted in different investment priorities throughout the post-war decades, but was not the driver of radical policy shifts.

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The 1980s saw the cleavages surrounding the establishment of state-employer housing play out in reverse, with the Fourth Labour Government arguing that the state should provide critical social services, such as public housing, but should not be in the business of business. They dismembered and privatised state-operated industries—selling off or demolishing much of the housing they provided to state employees. While the National party pushed back against the sale of state-employer housing, the change of government in 1990 saw them build on Labour's policy of privatisation by selling large numbers of state houses.

The diminished focus on employer housing provided by the state speaks to a broader ideological shift. The 'pro-business' politics of the 30s and 40s, and well into the 80s, saw the provision of housing to employees as an important function. Neoliberal forms of pro-business politics today, by contrast, have fewer paternalistic pretensions. The provision of housing to employees is no longer a part of the logic of 'running the country like a business'. More broadly, this ideological shift has been stabilised in the regulatory framework surrounding housing. Tax regulations militate against renting housing to employees below market-rates, and, unlike mid-century state-employer housing, the state can no longer exempt itself from housing regulations.

Beyond these ideological shifts, many of the circumstances compelling the state to provide housing to its employees have changed considerably throughout the 20th century. When it came the temporary workforce during the construction of railways, hydro-dams, and forestry operations, isolation was the most important consideration—with little or no other housing being available. A similar argument held for attracting state sector employees—particularly teachers and police officers—to rural areas suffering from housing shortages. The development of transport infrastructure and the rise in private vehicle ownership, however, has meant that there are fewer projects requiring a large mobile workforce being carried out in isolated areas, and that distance is less of a barrier to regional employment.

An additional reason for housing workers was that it would contribute to an attractive package of employment benefits and compensate for lower wages—often provided as concession in negotiations with unions. With the deregulation of the labour market in the 1980s and 90s, and the subsequent decline of both public and private sector unions, the power of workers to collectively bargain for such benefits has been significantly curtailed.[142] Nevertheless, one key condition that once led the state to provide housing for its employees—namely, a shortage of housing accessible to workplaces—remain as relevant for public sector employees today as in the heyday of teacher, railway, and forestry housing.[143]

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