

POLITICS VICTORIA VICTORIAN BUDGET

Government to act on cladding crisis, but only for buildings it owns

By [Clay Lucas](#)

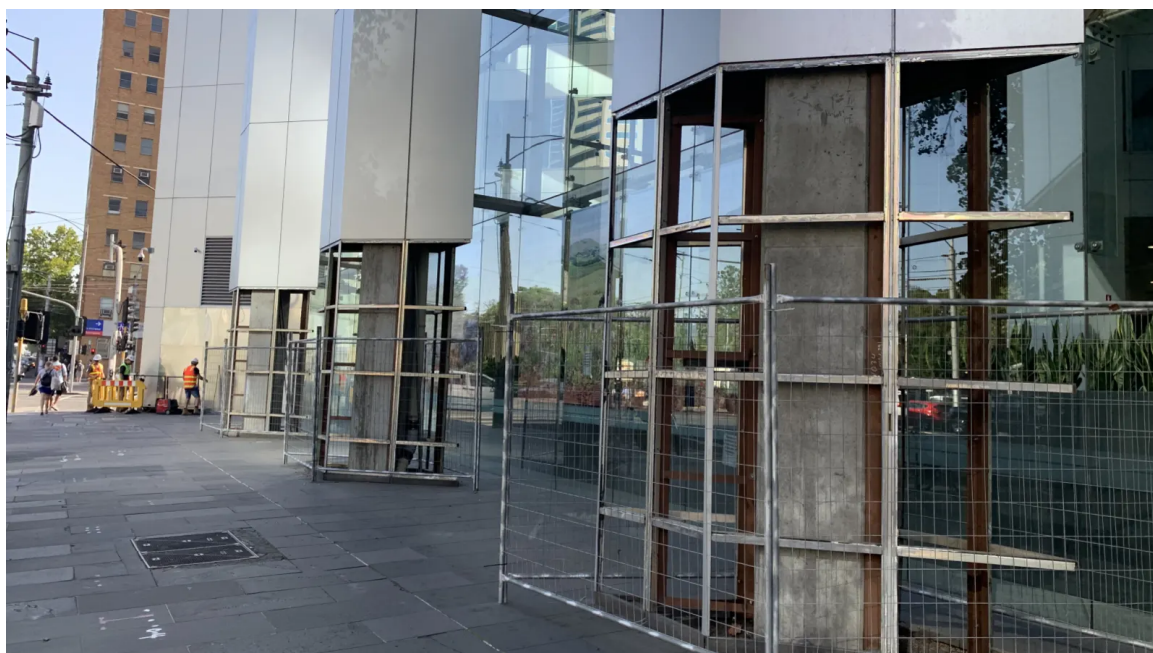
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The government will tackle the state's flammable cladding crisis – but only where it is the owner of the building.

The state budget released this week revealed \$160 million will be spent over the next four years fixing 95 government-owned buildings with dangerous cladding on their exteriors.

The government's promised "cladding rectification program" included in Monday's state budget shows that \$5.2 million was spent in the current financial year repairing 22 state-owned buildings considered the most dangerous.



Flammable cladding has been replaced on the privately owned building where the government's planning department is located in Nicholson Street, East Melbourne.

But no money was set aside in Monday's budget to help owners of apartment buildings covered in flammable cladding mount repairs.

In the United Kingdom, where 2017's deadly Grenfell tower fire killed 72 people, the government [this month announced a £200 million](#) fund (\$A368 million) to help repair private buildings covered in flammable cladding.

But the scale of the problem in Britain – where hundreds of buildings are affected – is nothing like in Australia, where thousands of medium and high-rise buildings have been constructed since the 1990s using highly flammable cladding.



Flammable cladding fuelled London's Grenfell tower blaze in 2017, in which 72 people died. EVENING STANDARD

Victoria alone has 681 buildings with combustibile cladding across the state, an audit by the Victorian Building Authority found. Three cladding fires have hit apartment buildings in Melbourne in the past five years.

The Victorian government has not detailed how it will ensure these private buildings will be fixed.

It has established a scheme whereby councils can allow apartment owners to pay for rectification works on their building over a decade on their municipal rates. But not one of these agreements has yet been struck.

Opposition MP Tim Smith said Planning Minister Richard Wynne had promised for far too long to address the state's cladding crisis.

He said the government's inaction was unfair because a failure of government regulation was the reason many apartments were covered in flammable cladding.

"Are we going to wait for a Grenfell Tower style tragedy before the Victorian government does something to fix this mess?" Mr Smith said.

The government has also come under attack for failing to release a list it holds of hundreds of buildings covered in dangerous flammable cladding.

Immediately after Grenfell, the state government [established a cladding taskforce](#) to identify buildings most at risk. Mr Wynne later took over control of authority for 327 buildings around Melbourne. But he kept secret the exact location of these buildings.

Owners and residents in those buildings have been sent letters in recent months warning of fire dangers and how to avoid them. *The Age* has compiled a list of scores of affected buildings but has chosen not to publish due to government insistence to do so would be dangerous.

In 2015, Victoria Police told the government it would be "prudent" not to publish details of buildings with flammable cladding "if there was no legal requirement to do so".

Professor Jonathan Barnett, a respected fire engineer, recently said it wasn't necessary for the government to keep its buildings list confidential.

"It's pretty obvious if a building has non-compliant cladding. And arsonists aren't necessarily dumb. What are we trying to hide?"



Clay Lucas



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