

# High-rise crisis looming

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**By Gerard Ryle**

**Up to one third of all new residential buildings in NSW may be faulty because of laws that allow private contractors to certify their own work , a *Herald* investigation has found.**

The laws have created a culture that relies almost entirely on the honesty of individuals, and can leave consumers stranded facing difficulties when faults are discovered.

Some big residential blocks are being passed safe by local councils and private inspectors based on certificates produced by sub-contractors. Councils are limited in their ability to check that the work has actually been done.

The *Herald* has found that some units have walls that do not meet the ceilings, others have fire doors that are not properly sealed. Some have structural cracks and water leaks.

The Lord Mayor of Sydney, Frank Sartor, said there was emerging evidence that some big buildings had major problems, and laws needed to be changed.

"We are talking about a very significant public issue. I cannot live with a major catastrophe in the middle of Sydney, nor can anyone. The system is so weak, it is so compromised, that it could happen."

The *Herald* has learned one block in the city had a fire order imposed on it long after it should have passed all safety checks.

Some of these checks included a reliance by the council and the NSW Fire Service on certificates produced by private contractors.

Allan Colquhoun, a former board member of the defunct building industry watchdog the Building Services Corporation, said: "One third of all new buildings is probably a conservative figure. We are literally talking about thousands of homes and units across the state.

"There are instances, definite jobs that I know about, where whole blocks of units are being passed without any inspection whatsoever ... A lot of reliance has been placed on ticks in boxes rather than people going out and viewing what is actually happening in the field."

The Government has admitted one of the more controversial parts of the privatisation of the building process is in need of reform.

Three years ago - to protests from local government - the Government introduced changes that allowed developers to bypass councils and hire private contractors to certify buildings.

Now the Planning Minister, Andrew Refshauge, says the scheme is failing.

"I have begun a major overhaul of building certification. I have put building certifiers on notice and I want the current failings in the system fixed," he said. "A home is the biggest investment in most people's lives, and this Government wants families to have confidence their buildings are safe and structurally sound."

The scheme will be amended to include a tough new professional accreditation process and more stringent auditing to weed out problem private certifiers.

"There are some significant changes occurring. We have not finalised those changes but we would expect ... to have those in place early next year," he said.

Cr Sartor said responsibility for ensuring buildings were safe should revert to councils. "Private certification is an extremely naive policy that needs to be changed ... there has not just got to be a waffley and bureaucratic review, there has to be clear and definite policy changes," he said.

"The fact is that if I am a certifier I will be loath to make trouble for a major developer who gives me a lot of work, so they have a major conflict of interest. I cannot believe such bad legislation ever got enacted.

"We are building up the conditions for catastrophic problems in the future."