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INTRODUCTION

Minister, Senator, Commissioner, Lord Mayor, ladies and gentleman

Thanks very much for that kind introduction Mr Chairman.

I very much welcome this Conference and I congratulate the organisers on putting it together. (I have some idea of the enormous amount of time that has gone into it).

I want to thank you for inviting me; I'm not yesterday's man – more like last century's man – since my report, "Our Homeless Children" was tabled in Federal Parliament in 1989.

The topic I've been asked to address is "Youth Homelessness It's been a long road" and in my remarks this morning I'm going to suggest that there are two major aspects to this, particularly in the context of the inquiry I conducted nearly thirty years ago and those conducted since.

The first is that the agenda is unfinished because there are still so many issues that have been inadequately addressed. The second concerns the extent to which these issues are interrelated and whether we need to adapt our strategies and re-focus the debate in light of the most recent inquiries and research.

I am delighted to see a number of familiar faces; some of you have been on the long road with me for the three decades since my report.

WHY LOOK BACK

In order to see where we are going and understand how best to get there, we need to understand where we have been.

Since many of you are decades younger than me and were not here 20-30 years ago, I will try to give you a concise summary of where we have come from.

My remarks this morning are based not only on our own original research, which is of course now very dated, but on a number of other important reports and books, at various points over the last 3 decades.

THE FIRST DECADE (1989 —1999)

The only other report that I was directly responsible for was the Human Rights and Mental Illness Report in 1993, but in the next 10 years there were:

- the Morris Report on Homelessness, commissioned by the Federal Parliament, in 1995
- several reports by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in the 1990s
- reports on the importance of Schools-based Intervention by Pinkney and Ewing in 1997 and another on the costs of Early Intervention and Prevention in 1998
- the Report "Down and Out in Sydney" in 1998 by the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, the Wesley Mission, Sydney City Mission and the Haymarket Foundation
- A number of significant reports by Chamberlain and McKenzie on Youth Homelessness, in the decade after my original Report are also the basis for some of my remarks this morning
- And there was of course the then Prime Minister's taskforce on youth homelessness chaired by my good friend, Major David Eldridge in the late 1990s – which led to a number of significant reforms.

THE AUSTRALIAN YOUTH FOUNDATION

Following my report in 1989, in the 90s I was Chairman of the Australian Youth Foundation. We funded more than 300 projects for disadvantaged young people. Many of these related directly to homeless young people — particularly young people with mental illness; young people with disabilities; indigenous young people and young people from rural and regional areas. All of those projects drew on the findings in our 1989 Report.

Many of our young people were disenchanted, disillusioned - even in despair of a society they saw as lacking compassion, or even any coherent value system.

We needed to produce a response which would convey a message to our young people. A message that this nation cared, that we are a compassionate society, that we don't leave the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged to fend for themselves in a society based on economic rationalism and survival of the fittest.

I decided that to keep in touch with developments I also needed to get more directly involved – including with a local community in a regional town and their attempts to deal with this issue.

We bought (with a large mortgage) a building of 8 apartments in the Forster-Tuncurry area, on the NSW North Coast near Taree, and worked with the Mayor of Taree and the St Vincent De Paul Society to care for 8 young homeless individuals or families.

I learned a lot from that experience – including the value of local community networks:

- for informed support of homeless young people;
- for job opportunities for them;
- and to enable them to stay in touch with friends, and where it is possible, their families.

(I also learned, after 5 years, I couldn't afford to continue funding it indefinitely).

THE MELBOURNE LORD MAYOR'S CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

Philanthropy is now an increasingly important factor in our efforts to effectively address youth homelessness.

There are many foundations, which are contributing, but today I want to pay a particular tribute to the Melbourne Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation.

It has made a major contribution by funding projects which have been successful in reducing homelessness and increasing the supply of affordable housing over the last 10 years.

Some of those projects are ones which we originally found among the most successful in Australia and encouraged 30 years ago. That is enormously encouraging.

HUMAN RIGHTS

At a major conference convened in 1999, a decade after my report, the organisers circulated a question to participants in advance.

"Do you think homelessness is merely a social support welfare issue or a housing issue?"

My view was, and still is, that homelessness is primarily and fundamentally an issue of basic human rights.

The Government of Australia, along with almost every other country in the World, agreed in 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights, that economic, social and cultural rights – (the right to adequate shelter, the right to medical services and nutrition, the right to education, the right to social security) – were just as important and, indeed, were integrally linked with – and indivisible from – civil and political rights (the right to life; the right to a fair trial; the right not to be subjected to cruel or inhuman punishment etc.).

THE LAW AND “RIGHTS”

In terms of where we have been – and where we need to go – it is important to understand that our 1989 Report was the first National Inquiry in Australia based on human rights – not on the law; not on economic policies and programs, but on the rights set out in international treaties which our Federal Government had voluntarily ratified – and which are binding on us as a matter of international law.

This can't be over-emphasised because the law – our law – simply did not recognise many human rights – and in some areas still does not.

Most of the serious violations of human rights that our report documented were not the result of any illegal or unlawful act. They were the result of “omissions” or “neglect” by the State — and while the terrible costs for thousands of our children were the result of that neglect, there was absolutely nothing our courts could, or would , do about it.

In fact, following the Homeless Children's Report I had to take a case to the High Court of Australia (The TEOH Case) – to change Australian law and give teeth to the Convention on the Rights of the Child – to ensure children's rights were taken seriously.

We got the High Court to rule, in 1994, that the Australian Government and all government officials were obliged to respect the rights of all children set out in the “Convention on the Rights of the Child”

- **including the right to adequate housing**
- **the right to special protection**
- **the right to protection from abuse and exploitation**
- **the right to education**

-- and not make decisions or implement policies that were inconsistent with or violated those rights.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL TREATIES

In the 1970's and 80's, as one of Australia's diplomats, I was often involved in negotiating international treaties. (including the Convention on the Rights of the Child)

- ❖ When we ratify an international trade agreement – we stick to it
- ❖ When we conclude an international defence treaty – we honour it
- ❖ When we negotiate an international air transport treaty – we abide by it

But when we ratify international human rights treaties – which are also binding on us as a matter of international law – (as we solemnly have) Our governments have frequently treated them as “optional extras”.

They are not!

We still have a long way to go in Australia in according equal priority to economic, social and cultural rights, to the homeless and other vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Homelessness needs to be addressed in that paradigm and analysed in that context – that is that adequate shelter is a basic human right, not just a housing issue, not just a welfare issue.

In my view all the aspects of that are inter-related – and flow very much from that fundamental premise. Unless we keep that fundamental premise in view, I believe we will lose sight of the holistic way – and the parameters within which – this issue must be responded to.

THE NECESSITY OF A “HOLISTIC” RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

In 1989, after we'd spent 2 years examining all the evidence, we saw a holistic response as critical, not only involving early intervention and prevention, family support strategies, reunification of children and young people who were homeless with their families where possible, but protection of their rights where that reunification was not possible or was highly undesirable in terms of their best interests.

We recommended a range of accommodation options, emphasising integrated services with medium and long term supported and unsupported accommodation, not just short term refuges as we had at that time.

We recommended that we had to have integrated programs, not only of shelter and accommodation, but also of financial support.

We drew very strong links with the relationships:

- between homelessness and unemployment
- with life skills training
- with counselling
- with health care
- with advocacy and legal services
- with information referral and Outreach
- with integrated services for young people in rural and regional areas where our youth suicide rate was extremely high and clearly homelessness was a factor in that.

THE EVIDENCE

We were appalled by the number of homeless children who had left home because they had been physically, sexually or emotionally abused – subjects then rarely talked about – but which the evidence made clear had to be taken into account.

Clearly, instead of blaming the children, we had to formulate adequate social responses where we, as adults, took responsibility for what we had bequeathed to many of the children who had become homeless.

We recommended many other reforms —and I note these are generally consistent with the 2008 report on “ Australia’s Homeless Youth “ almost 20 years later. (The “Eldridge Report”)

(It gives me no joy that the recent Royal Commission into the sexual abuse of children has only underlined our findings concerning the inadequacies of “institutional care”.)

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO OUR REPORT

After our 1989 Inquiry there was a response of a Government package of something like \$100 million dollars over 4 years for various programs for children and young people. We welcomed that.

In fact, the Inquiry produced many tangible results – including:

- changes to Federal and State laws.
- Increased supported accommodation for young people
- Several health initiatives
- Employment and Training support

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS, VULNERABLE AND DISEMPOWERED

But that was not primarily because as Chairman I was the Federal Human Rights Commissioner.

It was because our Report was based on listening carefully, in every State and Territory, to those directly affected – and giving voice to a very vulnerable and previously powerless group – enabling them to be heard at the highest level of our Government and Parliament.

I believe we need to keep that strategy in mind – and I’m greatly encouraged by the fact that the National Youth Commission adopted that strategy in their excellent report “Australia’s Homeless Youth”. This was in 2008 – almost 20 years after my original report.

In the last 6 weeks, I re-read that report (and many others) – and I note that many of you – either individually or through your associations – contributed very substantially to that report.

THE NUMBERS

The next major challenge in our “long road” was the question of incidence.

When our Report was first released, I was criticised on the basis that I must have been exaggerating the numbers of homeless children. Subsequent research showed, that if anything, our figures were an under-estimate.

McKenzie and Chamberlain in fact estimated that by 1994 the number of homeless young people aged 12 to 24 had increased to approximately 37,000

There have been many attempts in the past 30 years to get an accurate estimate of the number of young Australians who are homeless.

After hearing a great deal of evidence and commissioning a special report, I had, conservatively, originally estimated the number at “20,000 to 25,000”

I believe the most carefully considered estimate since then is in the 2008 Report “Australia’s Homeless Youth”.

“The statistical evidence is that youth homelessness has doubled since Burdekin. Australia has been notable for its innovative service models, with some of the most creative and advanced models of homeless services to be found anywhere – yet for a long time there has not been the political will to make the necessary social investment to begin reducing and ultimately eliminating youth homelessness.”

Clearly, we still confront major challenges.

But in acknowledging that, I also want to congratulate many of you who have been involved in developing those “. . . creative and advanced innovative service models”

THE CRITICAL LINK BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

In terms of the dimensions of the challenge (as opposed to simply the numbers) I want to touch briefly on my 1993 Report on Human Rights and Mental Illness. That 3 year Inquiry was a direct result of the Homeless Children's Report – in which we found that so many of our homeless young people who were wandering the streets and, in many cases, dying, had in some cases, a diagnosed mental illness – but in many cases, an undiagnosed mental illness or very serious mental health problem.

In the Mental Illness Report we concluded there were very strong links between homelessness and its tendency to exacerbate difficulties suffered by mentally ill people –and between mental illness and its tendency to increase the risk of homelessness. Clearly there was an inter-relationship there which had to be addressed and in many ways which was not being addressed.

There are people at this Conference this morning, and I'm delighted that they're here, that gave some of the most impressive and compelling evidence to our inquiry 30 years ago; and who have worked with the homeless young people for many years.

Again, following this Report, I was criticised by senior Ministers for exaggerating. The Deputy Prime Minister said I was “a bit too emotional”.

However, in the following year, the Federal Government came out with its own report – which not only acknowledged the close links between homelessness and mental illness – it concluded that approximately 500,000 Australians were affected by serious mental illness – but only about half of those were receiving any care or treatment from either our public or private health systems.

That is, there was something like 250,000 of our fellow Australians, on the Government's own figures, who were seriously mentally ill but were receiving no care and no attention at all. Many thousands of those were young people.

In our 1993 report on the mentally ill we found, on the basis of evidence presented by the President of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, that approximately 75 per cent of people in shelters for the homeless had histories of major mental illness. In that Report, we warned that if you asked any of the services dealing with homeless people, they were

seeing an increasing percentage of people affected by mental illness — and, disturbingly, an increasing number of those people were younger and younger.

The Report 'Down and Out' 5 years later again confirmed our findings.

- 75 per cent of homeless people visiting inner city refuges, hostels, places of care operated by St Vincent de Paul, the Sydney City Mission, the Salvation Army, the Wesley Mission, the Haymarket Foundation, were affected by serious mental illness or mental disorder.

All the evidence in our Inquiry and that Report also indicated that, in many cases, those affected by mental illness abused substances as a way of coping with the pain of their illness – **because we were not providing the sorts of care and attention that, as one of the wealthiest countries in the World, we can afford, we should afford, and we must afford !**

The breakdown of the figures in that 1998 Report was truly shocking.

- 46 per cent of the women were affected by schizophrenia – a very difficult and painful illness to cope with
- 23 per cent of the males were affected by schizophrenia
- 33 per cent had serious mood disorders
- 38 per cent of the women had experienced a major depressive disorder
- 93 per cent had experienced at least one major trauma in the preceding 12 months
- 58 per cent had experienced a serious attack or an assault in the 12 months before the survey was completed
- 68 per cent of the women had been sexually molested or raped

I still live on the edge of Kings Cross in Sydney.

I wish I could tell you that things have greatly improved.

But what I can tell you, subjectively, since I make a point of walking around the Cross every day that I'm here, is that the saddest sights of apparently abandoned young people are still everywhere I look.

THE “GEOGRAPHICAL” DIMENSION

Another aspect that we dealt with in our inquiry, which I believe is still relevant, was the geographical dimensions of the problem.

We found that the problem of homelessness, and indeed, homelessness for particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, was especially acute in rural and regional areas – yet we found that those were precisely the areas in which there were the fewest services, the most unsatisfactory services or, in many cases, no services at all.

A decade later, in 1999, just looking at the Eastern States, Chamberlain and McKenzie found that there were 62 regional cities or towns in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland where secondary schools had more than 10 homeless young people.

PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE GROUPS

In our initial Report we referred in particular to groups we saw as especially vulnerable. They included:

- not only young people with mental health problems
- young people with multiple disabilities
- children from families living in poverty
- aboriginal children and young people
- children and young people from non-English speaking backgrounds -- including young refugees
- children and young people, disgracefully, who were wards of the State, who were, literally and legally in the “care and protection” of the State
- young people in rural and isolated areas who were paying, in many cases, with their lives for the lack of services. (the youth suicide rate in our country areas was 300% higher than in our major cities)

There was no question, from the evidence, that the incidence of youth suicide was closely related to young people with mental health problems who were homeless and whose problems were not addressed. In many cases, were not even diagnosed.

If you look at the latest statistics, you find indeed that those particularly vulnerable groups I have already referred to are still there. Children and young people who are victims of physical emotional and sexual abuse; children and young people with disturbed behaviour; children and young people with disabilities, aboriginal children, children and young people particularly with dual and multiple disabilities, the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged, but again, paradoxically and inexcusably for whom there are the least services.

That was what we found in our original Report and, notwithstanding various attempts to address that, I believe that is still largely the case.

CHILDREN IN THE “CARE” OF THE STATE

If I had to identify just one piece of evidence as emblematic of the extremely disturbing findings in our 1989 Report, it was the Salvation Army officer, working with homeless young people in Kings Cross, who gave evidence at one point that most of the young boys prostituting themselves on the wall were wards of the State. It said volumes about how ineffective the State was – and in light of

recent reports still tells us and this Conference a lot about the sorts of programs we need for family support and a lot about the consequences of what happens when the family breaks down – and a lot about the challenges of effectively providing State care and protection even if the child is legally the responsibility of the State.

I was again accused of exaggerating the importance of this appalling evidence, but in evidence given to the Senate Community Affairs Committee 15 years later: ¹

- * In 2001, 65% of the Victorian female prisoner population had a “ protective care” history ²
- * In 2007, 42% of Australia’s homeless youth had a “ protective care” history ³
- * Once entering the juvenile justice system, as many as 90 % of “ protective care” clients will graduate to the adult criminal justice system ⁴
- * Almost 1 in 3 females leave the protective care system at age 16 having been pregnant or already with a child ⁵

In their 2008 Report the authors concluded

“Australia’s care and protection [programs] are in crisis. The Commonwealth Government to date has had little responsibility for care and protection, which for a long time has been a State responsibility...A courageous and radical national review of care and protection is urgent...Young people who have been in state care are heavily over-represented in the population of homeless young people.”

And in 2015 a national homelessness survey found that 63% of homeless young people had been in “state care”.

What does it take to get government to listen?

A class action against the state – by those for whom the state is legally responsible – for its negligence and breach of its legal obligations?

Footnotes :

- (1) (Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out of home care as children, August, 2004(1), p.165.)

- (2) Colvin, K., *The Women and Poverty Report: More than Half – Less than Equal*, Victorian Council of Social Services, (October, 2001, p 15)
- (3) Chamberlain, C. Johnson, G. & Theobald, J., *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge*, Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT University, February 2007.
- (4) Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry, Committee Hansard, 4 February 2004, p.30 cited in Senator Andrew Murray and Dr Marilyn Rock, *The Impact of Childhood Trauma Across the Lifespan: Historical Denial-Current Challenges*, September, 2005.
- (5) (Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry, Committee Hansard, 4 February 2004, p.30 cited in Senator Andrew Murray and Dr Marilyn Rock, *The Impact of Childhood Trauma Across the Lifespan: Historical Denial – Current Challenges*, September, 2005.

THE COSTS

The **human** cost to our young people -- in terms of their right to adequate shelter, to protection from abuse and exploitation and, where necessary, to receive special protection from the State – was obviously my main concern as Human Rights Commissioner.

But having previously had the privilege of 8 years in Canberra as Chief of Staff to our political leaders, I knew the power of Treasury – so we prepared a careful “cost benefit analysis” of the advantages to Australian society of early intervention and prevention – as opposed to neglecting young people in need – and then trying to pick up the pieces at the back end of the equation.

Those “costs” involved:

- The juvenile justice system / adult prisons
- Health care over a lifetime
- Long term social security costs
- Costs to the individual
- Costs to the community

Almost a decade later, in 1998, Pinkney and Ewing confirmed our findings.

And the 2008 report on “Australia’s homeless youth” concluded:

“On the existing evidence, actual budget costs to the government of redressing homelessness are considerably less than the long-term cost to the community of not doing so. Providing prevention and early intervention measures for young people or families is cheaper than the assistance required once they have become homeless.”

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

There are many aspects relevant to early intervention and prevention of homelessness.

In our 1989 Report we focused particularly on the importance of schools and our education system, concluding that:

“Outside the family, the school has the greatest contact with our children of all social institutions.”

We made a number of recommendations and said

“(These) specific recommendations rest on the premise -- and major recommendation – that our schools and teachers represent a critical resource which we must use effectively if we are to address the difficult issue of child and youth homelessness.

In their Report in 2008, the authors emphasized that their evidence also conclusively established how important this can be. Schools are sometimes the only point of contact left with young people whose families have disintegrated, who have been rejected, marginalised and who have, in some cases, fallen through whatever safety nets we have.

So the evidence in both these National Inquiries clearly indicated that once homeless young people lose contact with school, we often lose contact with them – and that 's one of the major aspects we need to take into account.

In their 2008 Report, the authors said

“The Burdekin Report identified families as potential sites for external support . . . by way of resource, respite care, counseling or related services.

This architecture of support remains relevant today and much of the evidence provided about young people and their families relates to the extent to which the nation has been able to make progress in this area of early intervention.”

I still believe, very strongly, that early intervention and support for families under stress is one of the most positive and promising areas to which we must devote further resources. The evidence is quite clear and some of it comes from those of you who have adopted this strategy as an important part of your services.

LOW COST HOUSING

Effectively addressing the causes of homelessness involves many factors and one of the most important is the availability of appropriate housing that homeless young people or those at risk of homelessness can afford.

The lack of such housing options was a major problem in the 1980s and we made a number of recommendations to address this in our Report.

Two decades later, in 2008, the affordability of housing had deteriorated even further – as concisely set out in “Australia’s Homeless Youth”.

Time precludes me going into detail – except to say, that **in my view, the situation in 2019 has deteriorated further still – with an extraordinary escalation in the capital cost of homes in most of our major cities and rents which are now completely unaffordable for many young people.**

The sort of integrated programs we need to develop, as the authors point out, also involve the availability of low cost housing as a fundamental factor.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

I am delighted that we have representatives of the Lord Mayor of Melbourne here and I congratulate them for the commitment Melbourne has demonstrated to this issue.

At the conclusion of the Homeless Children's Inquiry 30 years ago we stated, quite specifically, that any successful efforts to address youth homelessness must involve and acknowledge the role of local government.

Most of what affects people's human rights occurs at the local government level and I am very pleased that that it is better acknowledged today than it was 30 years ago.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

There are many reasons why I believe it's important to involve business and the private sector in our efforts to assist homeless or at risk young people. These advantages include, but are by no means limited to:

- Identifying possible job opportunities for these young people
- Assisting them, where local businesses are involved, to stay in touch with people established in their local community
- Adding significantly to the resources available from government, philanthropic sector and the wider community
- Better educating those in the business world about important issues challenging our society – and problems, preoccupied with their business activities, that they are frequently unaware of.

When I chaired our national foundation for disadvantaged young people, we had a strong policy of cooperating, wherever possible, with the private sector – and in our first five years managed to match \$10 million of our funds with \$10 million from business donors.

THE RELEVANCE OF DEVELOPMENTS OVERSEAS

Four decades ago, as a diplomat at our embassy in Washington, I saw daily the plight of the homeless and mentally ill and started to investigate - where they existed - the most effective responses.

A decade later, when I had the privilege to be our first Human Rights Commissioner, I brought out to Australia the woman leading the most effective program I had found in the poorest parts of Washington DC.

We have a lot to learn from each other - not just in this country - and in these days of globalisation and instant communication we can also share what we have learned.

I am sure this Conference will be a significant step in that direction – and I’m delighted to see that we have several people here from Canada and the United States.

[in fact, one of the documents which I relied on for comparative research in the national inquiries I chaired in 1989 and 1993 was the report on “Homelessness health and human needs“ by the Department of housing and urban development in Washington DC. (The Reagan Administration tried to bury that report – but was unsuccessful)

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

While candidly confronting our challenges, there are some things that as Australians we can be very proud of.

Our 1989 Report – and the strategy that we used of giving voice to many of our most vulnerable and powerless children – has become the model for National Human Rights Inquiries that have been conducted in many countries – from India to Indonesia and Mongolia to Malaysia.

One of the main reasons for that is that our Report produced substantial results, based on analysing this issue from a human rights perspective – and the strategy we adopted of widespread consultation with people such as yourselves – played an important role in educating the general public, as well as the government, about their plight.

In the last 12 months, I have been training the National Human Rights Commission of Zimbabwe to conduct a National Inquiry into undocumented children - of which there are approximately 2 million in a country of 13.5 million people.

These children have no birth certificates and in many cases their mothers have none either. Tens of thousands of them are homeless. Without birth certificates they have no hope of an education, of employment, or for that matter anything much at all.

Unlike the government in Zimbabwe, their National Human Rights Commission is a genuinely independent and thoroughly committed group of professionals - and the results of that Inquiry and effectively addressing this issue will be critical to the future of these children – and indeed the country.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Having had the privilege before I became Human Rights Commissioner of advising our political leaders, I knew that government policies and programs designed by bureaucrats in Canberra often ignored the insights of individuals in the community – particularly those who are the most vulnerable, powerless and almost voiceless.

The perception of many thousands of our young people is that we have become a society driven by economics, not a society driven by compassion and a balanced social agenda.

The vast majority of our young people care. They want leadership, they want a vision, they want to be challenged, they want an opportunity to contribute; they want to see and show compassion and, of course, the economic context in which that occurs is extremely important. Many of them believe we have lost sight of, or pay far too little attention to, the social impacts of our macro and micro economic policies such as widespread “privatisation, and outsourcing” of services originally provided by governments.

In our 1989 Report we recommended a holistic human rights based approach as essential. I believe it's fair to say that this has subsequently been confirmed by the Inquiries and Reports I have already mentioned.

GETTING GOVERNMENT TO LISTEN – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA

The first part of our strategy was to make sure we heard from all the relevant ‘stakeholders’, the next challenge was to get the Government’s attention. And of course the most important was to get carefully considered reforms to ensure the rights of homeless children and young people were protected.

But to get that to happen, we had to educate the public about the nature of the problem – and the only way to do that effectively is through the media.

One of the reasons I believe we got such a rapid response from Government 30 years ago, was that immediate following the tabling of my report in Federal Parliament, a compelling 2 hour documentary “Nobody’s Children” was aired on national television.

I want to sincerely thank Ian Darling and his colleagues for all the work they have done and are doing to bring these issues to the wider public.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Ultimately Government has a clear responsibility in a Democracy for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. If Governments dishonour that responsibility, there is a clear and present danger, on the evidence available, that our most vulnerable children will suffer serious consequences and, in some cases, pay with their lives.

That's not an exaggeration; they are the facts.

There's got to be a balance, obviously, between Federal Government, State Government, Local Government, the community, the private sector and the philanthropic sector.

Coordination of programs is essential – but you've got to have something to coordinate.

If resources are inadequate – or are being withdrawn or diminished at the same time as Government expects the churches, the philanthropic sector and the community to do more – that equation simply will not work as it should.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT IN ONE OF THE WEALTHIEST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD

I've been around our system in various capacities for long enough to know that when Governments say they can't afford appropriate care for the most vulnerable people in our country – that's a lie!!!

We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We can afford what we choose to afford. The only question is – do we give it a priority?

There are 196 countries in the world. In the last 30 years I have been working in over 70 countries to establish independent Human Rights Commissions – in Africa, Asia, Latin America and central and Eastern Europe. There is not a country that comes within a bull's roar of being as fortunate as we are in this country.

The Australian economy is \$1.7 trillion. That is more than the total of the economies of 102 of the world's poorest countries. Those countries have a total population of 803 million people – and their national economies combined total approximately \$1.4 trillion. (these are the latest figures on population (2017) and gross domestic product (2018) from the World Bank)

Where are our priorities? Are they with:

- our homeless or at-risk young people
- our indigenous young people
- our young people with disabilities
- our young people battling with mental illness – who self-medicate with drugs and alcohol and sometimes an unholy combination of those in order to cope with the pain of what they are suffering in the world of the homeless – the “Twilight Zone”, which the report “Down and Out” so graphically described.

THE “POLITICAL” POSSIBILITIES

It's been a long road, and it's still an enormous challenge – a challenge which demands and deserves the attention not only of those of you at this conference but of the whole Australian Community.

It demands the urgent attention of our political leaders and indeed all our political parties. Every political party should have policies related to homelessness and young people.

That's not only a possibility – it's an important – and realistic – expectation.

Let me give you two examples – from either side of our major political divide. In 1992 there was a state election imminent in this great state of Victoria. The then leader of the opposition was Jeff Kennett. He agreed to announce policies to assist homeless young people that he would introduce if he became Premier.

I asked David Eldridge to come to Sydney for a couple of days and he kindly agreed. We drafted those policies in my office; Mr Kennett announced them just before the election – and following the election, as Premier, he implemented a number of our recommendations.

In the not too distant past, I ran into another famous Australian – Bill Shorten. We were at a function together – and as he came into our group I said “Mr Shorten, you wouldn't remember me . . .” His immediate response was “Oh I remember you alright. I was the youth affairs advisor to the Victorian Minister for Youth Affairs when your Report “Our Homeless Children” was tabled in Federal Parliament. I had to sit up half the night writing my Minister's speech in response.”

Let me make it clear, I am not a member of any political party – but it appears entirely possible that we may soon have a Prime Minister who is both knowledgeable about these issues and committed to them.

WHY AM I OPTIMISTIC? – SUMMARY OF OUR ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Based on the evidence currently available:

- Clearly we're still facing an issue of major social proportions, clearly the results for young people coping with homelessness are serious and in some cases catastrophic. Clearly homelessness impacts more severely on the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged groups in our community.
- A number of programs were set up based on our findings and recommendations 30 years ago. Many of those have been improved based on subsequent research and have been expanded.
- The general public is better educated concerning the issue of homelessness
- There is now a much greater focus on the importance of mental health in relation to homelessness – and some excellent programs initiated by one of the most impressive witnesses I had in the Mental Illness Inquiry, Professor Patrick McGorry (the Headspace program)
- A number of issues related to pathways into homelessness – including parents with mental illnesses – are much better understood
- There is a greater willingness of local government to be involved
- There is a greater willingness and understanding of the private sector to contribute and many of our business people contribute significant financial resources to various programs.
- Many church based organisations have stayed the course (in spite of government pressure to cease their “advocacy activity”)
- Increased support from the philanthropic community (of which the Caledonia Foundation is an excellent example)
- A significant increase in activities which are jointly sponsored by the Churches, the philanthropic sector and the private sector.
- Many prominent Australians were moved by the findings in our 1989 Report to speak out on the issues effecting homeless young people and the necessity to respond effectively. (Quote from the former Governor General, Sir William Deane,... if time permits).
- That Inquiry has become the template for subsequent national inquiries in Australia and many other countries from India to Indonesia and Mongolia to Malaysia.

OUR CHALLENGE

We held our politicians' feet to the fire concerning children in off-shore detention. We owe it to homeless young people to do the same.

- We can afford to finish this agenda;
- we must afford to finish this agenda;
- we owe it to young people and ourselves to finish this agenda;

Because we diminish ourselves and our community if we do not.

Thank you for your courtesy and attention.