

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE NATIONAL STRATEGY	3
HUMAN RIGHTS – A FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH TO ADVOCACY.....	5
THE LAW AND “RIGHTS” – AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY	5
HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL TREATIES (CROC & CRPD).....	6
THE NECESSITY OF A “HOLISTIC” RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS.....	8
THE EVIDENCE – THEN AND NOW.....	10
GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO OUR REPORT – WHAT AND WHY?.....	11
THE ESCALATING NUMBER OF HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE	12
PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE GROUPS	13
THE CRITICAL LINK BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH	14
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES.....	18
CHILDREN IN THE “CARE” OF THE STATE.....	19
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE	21
THE “OPPORTUNITY” COSTS.....	22
STRESS FACTORS – THE LAST FEW YEARS	23
PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION – FAMILY SUPPORT; EDUCATION.....	24
WHO IS RESPONSIBLE? – GOVERNMENTS!.....	26
APPROPRIATE LOW-COST HOUSING	28
“PARTNERS” – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR.....	29
THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT	30
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR	30
THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION	31
GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS; PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRIES; -- AND BUREAUCRATS	32
GETTING GOVERNMENT TO LISTEN – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA.....	33
THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT IN ONE OF THE WEALTHIEST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD.....	34
THE “POLITICAL” POSSIBILITIES – OUR STRATEGY	35
WHY AM I OPTIMISTIC?	36
OUR CHALLENGE	38

INTRODUCTION

Minister, Mr Josh Burns MP Chairman of the Federal Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, Lord Mayor, Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen.

Thanks very much for that kind introduction.

I welcome this Conference and I congratulate the organisers on putting it together. (I've got some idea of the enormous amount of time involved).

Three decades ago, we got our Federal Government – and our State Governments – to focus on, and respond effectively to, the human rights abuses being suffered by homeless children and young people.

How do we do that again in 2023?

In terms of framing this Conference, there are 3 major aspects to this in light of the Inquiry I conducted over thirty years ago and those conducted since.

The first is that there are many issues we identified that are not, now, being adequately addressed.

The second concerns the extent to which these issues are interrelated.

And the third concerns the extent to which the situation has deteriorated.

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE NATIONAL STRATEGY

In order to develop an effective national strategy that will work in the current context we need to understand what has already been clearly established.

Since most of you were not here 20-30 years ago, I will try to give you a concise summary.

This is based not only on my Report 3 decades ago, but also other important reports over the last 30 years – including our Conference in 2021 – which concluded it was essential to develop a specific plan for child and youth homelessness.

There has been no comprehensive national report this year – but I do have the latest information – as of last Friday – from the Association I am patron of in our largest city, Sydney.

THE FIRST DECADE (1989 —1999)

In addition to my 3 year Inquiry into Human Rights and Mental Illness, the Homeless Children's Report led to a number of reports in the next 10 years. These included:

- **Morris Report on Homelessness, commissioned by the Federal Parliament, in 1995**
- Several reports by the **Brotherhood of St Laurence** – and by **Chamberlain and McKenzie** in the 1990s
- Reports on the importance of Schools-based Intervention by **Pinkney and Ewing** in 1997 and on the costs of Early Intervention and Prevention in 1998
- 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**
 - And 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, during the next 10 years, I was Chair of the Australian Youth Foundation. We funded more than 300 projects for disadvantaged young people. Many for homeless young people; young people with mental illness; young people with disabilities; indigenous young people, LGBTIQ+ young people and young people from rural areas. All of those projects drew on the findings in our 1989 Report.

Many of our young people were disenchanted, disillusioned – and in despair of a society they saw as lacking compassion.

We needed to produce a response which would convey a message to our young people. **A message that our Government 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.

After the brutal robo-debt fiasco we need to re-emphasise that message again.

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To keep in touch with developments in regional areas, I decided to get more directly involved – including with a local community in a regional town.

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 and the St Vincent De Paul Society to care for homeless children and young people.

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).

HUMAN RIGHTS – A FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH TO ADVOCACY

At a major conference in 1999, a decade after my Report, the organisers asked participants: **"is homelessness 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 – (including the right to adequate housing, the right to social security, the right to nutrition and the right to education) – were just as important as civil and political rights (the right to life, the right to a fair trial, and freedom of expression).

THE LAW AND “RIGHTS” – AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY

In terms of our future strategy – it is important to understand that my 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 are still, today, binding on us as a matter of international law.

This can't be over-emphasised; because our law simply did not recognise many human rights and in some important areas affecting homeless children still doesn't.

It is also important in this context to understand that Australia is the only country in the common-law world – the only country out of 65 former British Colonies – that does not have a Bill of Rights – either in our Constitution or in Federal Legislation.

Most of the serious violations of human rights that my 1989 Report documented were not the result of any illegal 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, in 1994 I intervened in a case in 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 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 violated those rights.

But what happened? **Disgracefully the Australian Government introduced legislation to nullify the High Court's decision.**

HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL TREATIES (CROC & CRPD)

As one of Australia's diplomats, and later as HR Commissioner, I was involved in negotiating several international treaties – including the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** and the **Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.**

Australia has ratified both those international treaties – and we did that after lengthy consultation with all our State governments.

The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities stipulates that people with disabilities (including psychiatric disabilities) must receive special assistance because

of their vulnerabilities. It took some of us several years in difficult negotiations to ensure that psychiatric disabilities were included in that treaty.

So children and young people have legal rights to special protection because they are vulnerable.

- children and young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable.
- And homeless children and young people – including those with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities – are among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable

- ❖ **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 particularly vulnerable groups.

Child and youth homelessness needs to be addressed in that paradigm and analysed in that context – that is that adequate shelter is a fundamentally important human right – not just a housing issue, not just a welfare issue, not just an economic 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 concluded a holistic response is essential**, not only involving **early intervention and prevention; family support strategies; reunification of homeless children and young people with their families where possible** -- but **protection of their rights where that reunification is 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 also recommended that we had to have integrated programs, not only of shelter and accommodation, but also of educational and 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.

I believe it's fair to say that the findings and recommendations in our 1989 Report have been confirmed by all the relevant subsequent inquiries and reports.

In response to my 1989 Report, a small community-based organisation decided to change by adopting all the recommendations of that Report – including a holistic and integrated approach. They (unfortunately) renamed themselves The Burdekin Association. For the last 25 years they have delivered a holistic and integrated service

– and many young people have returned or remained at home due to their capacity to support the family unit in the first instance rather than focusing on alternative accommodation options. When home is not a safe place, a range of accommodation options is offered and young people are supported in gaining employment, education, health care, counselling, advocacy, rent support and financial assistance.

Over 90% of our young people eventually return to their family home or move with confidence into sustainable independent housing.

THE EVIDENCE – THEN AND NOW

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 reforms to policies and programs. Importantly, these are consistent with the 2008 report on “Australia’s Homeless Youth “ almost 20 years later.

And the **2017 Report of the Royal Commission into the Sexual Abuse of Children** graphically underlined our findings concerning the appalling inadequacies of “institutional care” – and other gross violations of the human rights of thousands of vulnerable children.)

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO OUR REPORT – WHAT AND WHY?

The Federal Government responded to my 1989 Report with a package of approximately \$100 million dollars for **various programs specifically for children and young people.**

Our Report also led to other important results – including:

- Changes to Federal and State laws.
- Increased supported accommodation for young people
- A number of health initiatives; and
- Employment and Training programs

But that was not primarily because, as Chair, 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 those caring for them (people like yourselves) – 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.

We need to keep that strategy in mind – and the National Youth Commission adopted that strategy in their excellent report “Australia’s Homeless Youth” in 2008 – almost 20 years after my original report.

In the last 10 weeks, I re-read that report (and many others) – and I note that many of you – either individually or through your associations – contributed to that Report.

But we do not now need more reports!

The problems we identified in 1989 have been repeatedly – and authoritatively – documented [in the last 3 decades].

THE ESCALATING NUMBER OF HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

After hearing a great deal of evidence I had, conservatively, originally estimated the number of homeless children and young people at 20,000 to 25,000.

I was criticised on the basis that I must have been exaggerating the numbers. Subsequent research showed, however, that our estimate was conservative.

Counting homeless young people accurately is always difficult.

One of the most carefully considered estimates since then was in the 2008 Report “Australia’s Homeless Youth”, which concluded:

“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.”

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”

Clearly, we still confront major challenges.

The latest “official” estimate from our 2021 Census was that over 122,000 of our fellow Australians were homeless.

Of these 45,000-46,000 were homeless young people.

Nearly 28,000 were aged 12-24

and, even more disturbingly, 18,000 were aged under 12 – and that is likely to be an underestimate for many reasons as you know.

PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE GROUPS

In our initial Report we identified groups that were especially vulnerable. They included:

- young people with mental health problems
- young people with multiple disabilities
- children from families living in poverty
- Indigenous 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.

If you look at the latest statistics, those particularly vulnerable young people (with psychiatric disabilities or serious mental health problems) are still there – the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged – but then again, inexcusably, for whom there are the fewest services.

The **National Disability Insurance Scheme** has certainly been an important positive factor. However, at our Association in Sydney we’re seeing more and more young homeless people with disabilities turned away from the NDIS. And accessing NDIS requires strong advocacy and a financial investment to prove eligibility -- and then if you gain entry into the scheme you are required to continue to fight for further support. Young people “in care” or who are homeless require the support of staff to gain what they need – and many hours of staff time is spent on paperwork. Once a young person is no longer in the service, the NDIS is too complex for them to manage alone and they don’t have anyone to support them -- often resulting in them falling out of the system.

THE CRITICAL LINK BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

In terms of the dimensions of our current challenges (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 thousands of our homeless young people who were wandering the streets had a diagnosed mental illness – but in many cases, an undiagnosed mental illness or very serious mental health problems.

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.

Addressing that challenge effectively must be central to any strategy now.

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

But very soon afterwards, our Report motivated the Federal Government to come out with its own report. This 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 in every state and territory and confirmed 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, I 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 documented in our 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 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% of the homeless women were affected by schizophrenia – a very difficult and painful illness to cope with
- 38% of the women had major depression
- 93% had experienced at least one major trauma in the preceding 12 months
- 58% had been attacked or seriously assaulted in the previous 12 months
- 68 % 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 they haven't.

Professor Pat McGorry

One of the most impressive witnesses in my National Inquiry on Human Rights and Mental Illness was **Prof. Pat McGorry** – subsequently named Australian of the year.

According to Professor McGorry:

- **“At least one million young Australians a year are affected by serious mental illness”** and we know that many thousands of those have schizophrenia – (expert evidence indicates approximately 10% of those young people will take their own lives if they don’t get adequate care.)

The evidence is crystal clear. These young people are disproportionately represented in our homeless population.

- Professor McGorry believes – as I do – that:

“Early intervention is the key to better outcomes”

And his program “Headspace” is very successful. But many “Headspace” mental health centres now have waiting lists of 3 to 4 months*.

- He believes that “a national approach is desperately needed”
- And that “politicians understand there are problems – but for them to respond – the community needs to rise up”

Lifeline – suicide – human rights

Recently I had to address 100 lifeline counsellors in Sydney.

- They have had to introduce – in addition to phone and face-to-face counselling – **a texting service** – increasingly being used by young people in the 12 to 19 age group.

- **In the first 8 months, there were over 45,000 texts seeking help – and that is in an area with a population of less than one million people.**

And in the past month there has been an 85% increase in the comparable numbers.

[I checked these figures with Lifeline last Friday and there is enormous pressure on their services - including from young people who can't get into Professor McGorry's Headspace programs]

- The latest research I have access to, indicates that about half of all mental health conditions begin before age 14.

Our service in Sydney receives substantial support from the Government – **but 84% of young people in our youth homelessness program are presenting with mental health issues – and we're constantly having to raise funds from the community to provide continuing mental health support for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.**

For our young people with mental health concerns, timely access to ongoing and affordable care is absolutely critical.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

In our original Report, we found that the problem of homelessness, and indeed, homelessness for particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, 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.

Many young people paid with their lives for this neglect (our youth suicide rate in regional and rural areas was 300% higher than in our major cities)

Unfortunately, the latest evidence indicates this is still a serious problem.

At our Association in Sydney we are increasingly getting referrals of young people coming from rural areas due to a lack of services in their community.

There is a chronic undersupply of available psychiatrists, psychologists, and Counsellors – and in many areas no affordable professional care at all is available for families of modest means – let alone those in financial difficulty.

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 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 a lot about the sorts of programs we need for family support – a lot about the consequences of what happens when the family breaks down – and a lot about the challenges of effectively providing 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

And 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?*

In just one area of Sydney that the State Government asked us to take over, in 3 years, we have gone from 5 young people in care to 55. We now have children as young as 7. Housing affordability is limiting exit options for young people leaving care -- resulting in more “care leavers” accessing homelessness services. Whilst the NSW government has extended financial support for young people leaving care to age 21 it favors those in foster care.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

All the issues I have already touched on and the detailed recommendations in my 1989 Report are relevant to Indigenous children and young people. **But they differ in complexity and urgency in the current context.**

We will have to go into that in more detail in the session specifically allocated to this tomorrow. But the urgency of addressing these problems is indicated by the fact that a grossly disproportionate number – 28% of all the children we are supporting in Sydney are Indigenous children.

THE “OPPORTUNITY” COSTS

The **human** cost to our young people -- in terms of their right to adequate shelter, 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

And the 2008 NYC 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.”

STRESS FACTORS – THE LAST FEW YEARS

The last few years have been enormously stressful for families.

The covid 19 pandemic followed closely on the heels of **widespread bush fires** — and, shortly afterwards, **devastating floods**. The latest evidence is that these events have been extremely stressful – including for many young Australians – particularly our most disadvantaged young people.

AND WE NOW HAVE

- **House prices** which are completely unaffordable for many and
- **Fixed-rate mortgages** which are about to become much more expensive.
- **Rents** which are completely unaffordable – for a very large number of people — including in major cities and in many coastal and regional towns as well – as demonstrated in **Anglicare’s National Rental Affordability Report in April 2023. And in the last 3 months the problem has got worse.**
— In NSW, youth rent support options are capped -- resulting in unusable programs as rents have risen above the eligibility limit of the program.

There is an increased risk of homelessness for tens of thousands of people – and the evidence I have is supported by warnings coming from numerous community associations dealing with homeless children and young people.

In spite of some progress in Victoria and New South Wales since 2019

- **the failure to progress early intervention programs – to stem the flow of young people into homelessness is one of the biggest policy failures**
- **the slowness and under- investment in implementing a secure system of “leaving care” support is another area of major under-development – with very serious consequences for the young people concerned.**

- **the needs of young people have not been sufficiently factored into housing plans for increasing the supply of social and affordable housing.** (In NSW, we've had no increase in bed numbers for youth homelessness services.)

In August last year, the National Productivity Commission, in its report "In Need of Repair" gave a thorough critique of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement and made some excellent suggestions on priorities.

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION – FAMILY SUPPORT; EDUCATION

There are many aspects relevant to **early intervention and prevention of homelessness. These include support for families at risk of disintegrating.**

In our 1989 Report, we identified ways and resources by which families could be supported including – **respite care, counseling, and related services.**

Nearly 20 years later, in their 2008 Report, the authors confirmed that this approach was extremely important.

Early intervention and support for families under stress is one of the most positive and promising areas to which we must devote more 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.

In our 1989 Report we also focused 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 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.”

20 years later, in their 2008 Report, the authors emphasised 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.

Once homeless young people lose contact with school, we often lose contact with them.

Our Association in Sydney has secured philanthropic funding to employ two teachers to address the gaps in literacy and numeracy for children and young people in care. We had an increasing number of young people with no day placements options, so we created our own education program to give them options and opportunities. (For example, we had a 14 year old with the literacy levels of a 7 year old who came to us having not been at school for 2 years. With our education support the young person is now attending TAFE and is enthusiastic about his future.)

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE? – GOVERNMENTS!

Ultimately in a democracy, Government has a clear responsibility for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

That responsibility cannot be – and must not be – “outsourced” or “privatised”.

Many of our young people see that the Government has privatised or outsourced responsibility for everything from aged care to employment programs. They don't see much compassion for the most vulnerable in our society – and, rightly or wrongly, that perception was brutally reinforced by the government-initiated Robodebt scandal.

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.

If Governments dishonour their responsibility, there is a clear and present danger, on all 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. Those are the facts!

Our strategy needs to acknowledge that there's got to be a balance 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 from Government are inadequate – at the same time as Government expects the Churches, the philanthropic sector and the community to do more – that equation simply will not work..

Our Association in Sydney counts on donations and fundraising to provide: mental health support, specialist care, an appropriate education program, and additional staffing resources to handle the increased compliance requirements.

APPROPRIATE 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 2023 has deteriorated much further still – with an extraordinary escalation in the capital cost of homes in our major cities and rents – and electricity – costs which are now completely unaffordable for many young people.**

The sort of integrated programs we need to develop must involve the availability of low-cost housing – including for young people – as a fundamental factor.

The recent announcement of an extra 2 billion dollars by the Government is significant – but given we recently announced a major increase in our National surplus – from 4 billion, to almost 20 billion dollars (from May to June) more could – and should – be earmarked for social housing.

“PARTNERS” – 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, the philanthropic sector and the wider community
- Better educating those in the business world about important issues challenging our society – and problems – that preoccupied with their business activities, 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 5 years managed to match \$10 million of our funds with \$10 million from business donors.

But after covid, competition for corporate donations is more challenging than ever.

Our Association in Sydney is receiving substantial funds from the Property Industry Foundation – which is also helping us fast-track our young people into employment opportunities. We also get substantial support from football, cricket and golf clubs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

I am delighted that we have the Lord Mayor of Melbourne here and I congratulate her 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.

Much of what affects people's human rights occurs at the local government level (-- a level, unfortunately ignored in our Constitution --) and I'm very pleased that that it is better acknowledged today than it was 30 years ago.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR

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

Nurturing links with the philanthropic sector must also be part of our strategy.

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 increasing the supply of affordable housing over the last 10 years.

Some of those projects are ones which we originally helped to finance 30 years ago. That is enormously encouraging.

But after covid, competition for the philanthropic dollar is intense.

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

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.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS; PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRIES; -- AND BUREAUCRATS

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 working with the most vulnerable, powerless and often voiceless.

Government officials advising politicians – be they Federal, State or local bureaucrats – do not wake up each morning wondering how they can consult civil society and NGO representatives.

Our strategy has to effectively engage them.

And developing a new national plan for homeless children and young people needs to effectively engage you!

GETTING GOVERNMENT TO LISTEN – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA

- **The first part of our strategy three decades ago was to base our Inquiry and recommendations squarely on the fundamental rights of all children and young people.**
- The second part was to ensure that we heard from all the relevant ‘stakeholders’ in each state and territory.
- 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 we got such a rapid response from Government 30 years ago, was we made sure our public hearings were extensively covered in the print and electronic media. And immediately following the tabling of my report in Federal Parliament, a compelling 2 hour documentary about the Inquiry “Nobody’s Children” was aired on national television.

I am delighted we have several representatives of the media here. **We need to always be ready to brief them on the problems you are dealing with.**

OUR SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Our governments spend hundreds of billions of dollars on our transport systems – our road and rail infrastructure etc. That is appropriate.

But our governments need to understand that our children and young people are a critical part of our social infrastructure. If we do not allocate sufficient resources to care for them, not only will they suffer, our whole society will suffer.

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 if 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 of them to establish independent Human Rights Commissions – in Africa, Asia, Latin America and central and Eastern Europe. There's not a country that comes within a bull's roar of being as fortunate as we are in this country.

Our national income is approximately 2.4 trillion Australian dollars. That is more than the total of 110 of the world's poorest countries combined. Those countries have a total population of nearly a thousand million people – and all their national incomes combined total approximately 1.7 trillion Australian Dollars.

Where **ARE** our priorities? Are they with:

- our homeless or at-risk children and young people
- our indigenous young people
- our young people with disabilities
- our young people battling with mental illness – who often 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 – OUR STRATEGY

This is not a “party political” issue. It is an urgent national priority.

It demands the urgent attention of our political leaders and indeed all our political parties.

Every political party should have policies related to homelessness children and young people.

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

Let me give you an example. 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.

WHY AM I OPTIMISTIC?

Our Report in 1989 – and the Government’s responses were effective.

They specifically addressed the needs of homeless children and young people.

- **A number of programs set up based on our findings 30 years ago have not only been successful, they have been expanded – validating our original recommendations** about the necessity for a specific plan for homeless children and young people.
- The general public is now better educated concerning the issue of homelessness.
- There is now a greater understanding of the importance of mental health.
- A number of issues related to pathways into homelessness – including parents with mental illnesses – are much better understood.
- There is a greater willingness of some local governments to be involved.
- There is a greater understanding and willingness of the private sector to contribute.
- There is increased support from the philanthropic community.
- Many church-based organisations have stayed the course (in spite of outrageous pressure from a former prime minister to cease their “advocacy activity”).
- **Most importantly, we now have a national Government whose policies and programs more appropriately balance economic growth with compassion for the most vulnerable and needy of our fellow Australians.**

And at the same time, we have State Governments that generally have a progressive approach to social justice.

- **We also now have a Government seriously consulting about the need for Australia to have a Bill of Rights – and we have the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee responsible for examining that here with us this morning. That is enormously encouraging. It would be a massive step forward in properly protecting the rights of our most vulnerable children and young people.**
- **Three of our Federal Ministers are coming to this Conference –**

- **The Minister for Social Services**
- **The Minister for Housing and Homelessness; and**
- **The Minister for Early Childhood and Youth**

All of them have an impressive track record of supporting social justice initiatives.

- **And the Minister for Housing and Homelessness has promised to begin community consultations concerning a national homelessness and housing plan.**
- **Also joining us, will be some of our most effective politicians from other parties.**
- **All the evidence in the last 30 years indicates that we need a specific “stand-alone” plan dedicated to child and youth homelessness -- that will prevent children and young people continuing to experience homelessness into their adult years.**



- **The last 10 years were a lost decade** in progress to help our homeless children and young people. A great deal of evidence, including the official figures in the latest census, supports this view.
- **It is critical that we do not lose the next 10 years.**
If there is adequate consultation by the Government – over a sufficient time scale – with the national youth coalition and people such as yourselves, I believe we will succeed.

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.

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.

Circumstance mean I won't be joining you again at the next conference. It's been a great privilege to walk this road with many people I see here this morning.

Footnotes relating to CHILDREN IN THE CARE OF THE STATE:

- (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.