



St Vincent de Paul Society

good works

The Faces in the Street

- 1 *“They lie, the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone
That want is here a stranger, and that misery’s unknown;
For where the nearest suburb and the city proper meet
My window-sill is level with the faces in the street —
Drifting past, drifting past,
To the beat of weary feet —
While I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.”*

These words were, of course, written by Henry Lawson in 1888.

The tragedy of Australian Social Policy in recent times is that these words are just as true today as then.

- 2 In 2004 the Commonwealth Parliament tabled the most significant report on poverty in Australia for over 30 years. It is a telling fact that most Australians would not be aware of this important piece of history.
- 3 The Senate Poverty Inquiry:
 - took nearly 12 months;
 - heard from 340 witnesses;
 - received 274 submissions;
- 4 The Major Findings of the Report were that we have:
 - Unacceptable levels of poverty (up to 3.5 million people).
 - A growing gap between rich and poor.
 - Growing inequality of opportunity in housing, health, education, and full-time jobs.
 - Over 1 million people with jobs, who are still poor – “the working poor”.
 - Inadequate support for people without jobs.
 - The most affected groups were children, youth and families with children.
 - Widespread disadvantaged groups, particularly in rural and regional areas.

- 5 The most important recommendation (out of the 95) was the call for:
- A National Summit to develop a National Strategy to address poverty and inequality.
 - The establishment of an organisation to implement and oversight the strategy.
- 6 Other recommendations were made concerning the inequality of access to services such as:
- employment,
 - housing,
 - health,
 - education and training, and
 - assistance to disadvantaged groups in the community, especially in rural and regional areas.
- 7 Instead of engaging in what Vinnies likes to call: a Politics of Hope, we have witnessed, since the Poverty Inquiry, nothing more than a politics of blame: blame being shifted between Commonwealth and State jurisdictions and, more significantly, blame being placed on the shoulders of the poor.
- 8 The current welfare reforms, for example, not only do not offer income security, they take away hope.
- 9 The Social Policy Research Centre (UNSW) estimated that the maximum allowance for a single parent and 2 children met only 76% of a minimum low-cost household budget.
- 10 What kind of hope is offered when, as of 1st July last year, those on incomes of \$150k got an extra \$240 a fortnight in the pockets and those on welfare get their incomes cut by up to \$90 a fortnight?
- 11 Parents studying full-time became \$63 a week worse off. People with disabilities studying full time \$166 became week worse off!
- 12 Despite, the rhetoric which blames the people who are outside the labour market we actually have the 4th lowest proportion of our population reliant on social security benefits among the OECD nations and the 5th lowest proportion of social security transfers in OECD.
- 13 As for the myth that the jobs are always there to lift the poor out of poverty we that 9/10 jobs created in 90s paid under \$26K a year ½ paid under \$15K.
- 14 What is the price that we, as a community, pay for this neglect of the real causes of poverty and exclusion? We have witnessed a 25% increase in people in custody over last decade. Each day 1 in every 200 Australians experiences homelessness.
- 15 In fact the absence of safe, secure and affordable housing has become one of the hallmarks of Australia at the dawn of the 21st Century. More than 160,000 Australians experience homelessness each year. 1.7 million Australians are in housing stress. 67% of these are in the private rental market.

- 16 The children in these families are of particular concern to us. They are cut off from a decent life in the present, but they are also a sign of our failure to invest in the future of this wonderful country.
- 17 One in every 3 homeless Australians is a child. Two in every 3 children who need support are turned away from homelessness services.
- 18 UN statistics tell us that we have 1 in 7 children in Australia living in poverty. This is a scandal in such a prosperous country, a country that, according to the other week's Treasury figures, has just experienced a 15% increase in private sector wealth; an increase that further expands the gap between the rich and poor since it is based on property and share ownership.
- 19 We can achieve a significant reduction in the rate of poverty and the level of exclusion in Australia. The Social Policy Research Centre has estimated that it would cost 2-3% of our GDP to lift *everyone* out of poverty. The fact that we do not do so, therefore, is a matter of choice, not affordability.
- 20 The great Martin Luther King once wrote that: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter." I pray that Australians will not remain silent about the faces in the street.

Brian Bull, AO APM
Vice President National Council of Australia
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