

**Public Interest Law Clearing House  
Homeless Persons Legal Clinic**

**Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006 – a  
Nation’s Shame**

**An address by the Honourable Alastair Nicholson AO,  
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## **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

### **Article 27**

- 1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.**
- 2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.**
- 3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.**

**“Let’s start talking about real “early intervention” and have our Commonwealth Government say sorry to our Indigenous people, redistribute some of the wealth, income and power, start to create full employment, an equitable health system based on health promotion, provide safe, affordable housing for everyone, stop treating refugees as criminals and less than human, and free all women and children from domestic and family violence. These seem to be good early intervention strategies”**

**(Oberin, 2002).<sup>1</sup>**

I am honoured to be asked to deliver this address tonight. It follows the substance of a similar address that I gave to the Fourth National Conference of Homelessness Organisations in Sydney in March of this year, so I hope that those who were present will forgive me for covering some of the same ground.

I should also make it clear that I do not purport to be an expert on homelessness. I was of course aware over the 16 years that I spent at the Family Court of Australia of the absolutely vital nature of the provision of a home and love and support to all children and particularly to the very young.

I came to take a more specific interest in youth homelessness following being asked to launch a report two years ago for Hanover Welfare Services. I was greatly disturbed by the contents of the report itself and by the extent of the problem of youth homelessness in the community that it revealed. I was also particularly concerned about the negative attitude of the Federal Government to the problem.

I had perhaps somewhat naively thought that following the attention given to this subject in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, much more would have been done to address the problem.

I was very disturbed to find that this was not so and that it has become a subject that is largely glossed over by many politicians and remains a running sore in the Australian community. In a strange sense we, as a community, appear to have come to accept it as a norm, despite the great efforts of organisations such as this one.

Following the launch of the report to which I have referred, I was asked to participate along with Hanover representatives in discussions with the trustees of a well known charitable fund as to whether they would be prepared to fund further projects arising from the report. Their response was not an unreasonable one, namely that the issues involved were properly ones for Government and were too widespread to be able to be dealt with by a single organisation. The difficulty is to get the Federal Government to take

notice of what is undoubtedly a shameful situation in our community. Some State Governments and particularly the Victorian Government have been much more proactive, but the Federal Government's attitude to the problem remains negative.

In 1987 then Prime Minister Hawke famously said – “By 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty.”

The media response to that statement was and is overwhelmingly cynical and the statement is still referred to with derision.

It may be that the statement was over ambitious but it did at least adopt the elimination of child poverty as a goal, which is a goal that has been lamentably lacking since that time. A recent report published by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence pointed out that, whereas the European Union and countries such as Canada have made the elimination of child poverty a specific goal, there is no similar commitment from Australian Governments.<sup>2</sup>

Mr Hawke's statement was followed by one of the landmark studies into child homelessness, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Report chaired by Brian Burdekin<sup>3</sup> and much improvement did come from that report.

A report commissioned by the Social Policy Research Centre in 2005 commented that following the Burdekin Report:

*“Homelessness amongst young people became widely recognised as a major social problem and generated a new urgency about the needs of homeless children.”<sup>4</sup>*

However, as we will see, the situation has deteriorated since.

*It has been argued that in spite of the substantial resources that were generated for homelessness services by the Burdekin Report on homeless children 15 years ago (HREOC, 1989), many of Burdekin's recommendations were not fully implemented (Salvation Army, 2003).<sup>5</sup>*

It is true that when Prime Minister Howard came to office in 1996 he indicated an intention to act in this area. In 2000, the Federal Government unveiled its National Homelessness Strategy. However, it appears that while

some of the approaches adopted have been successful, the Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations said of the strategy,

*“The NHS had involved ‘little more than a series of pilot projects with no resources for their ongoing implementation and continuance’. They recommended instead the kinds of homelessness policies developed in Victoria and Western Australia, which they felt had been far more effective in reducing levels of homelessness (AFHO, 2003a: 11).<sup>6</sup>*

In fact the Howard Government’s performance has been lamentable as has been the performance of most of the States and Territories, excluding Victoria and Western Australia, despite a booming economy and unprecedented sums flowing into the coffers of Federal and State Governments over the 19 years since Mr Hawke’s statement was made.

This was further confirmed in March 2006 with the release of an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report which indicated that around one in two people who request immediate help from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP) are turned away each day, and almost two in every three children accompanying a person seeking immediate accommodation are refused a place. In its media release the Institute spokesperson said that “while getting into the system can be difficult, once accommodated, it is likely that people who require more SAAP accommodation will continue to have their needs met.”<sup>7</sup>

That must be cold comfort indeed for those who are turned away. The report also indicated that family groups are more likely to be turned away than other homeless people.

The extent of the assessment of child and youth homelessness in Australia, which is closely linked to poverty, has in the past to some extent depended upon the figures arising from the 2001 Census. However, as the NGO submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child reveals, there appears to have been a significant increase by 2002-3 based upon the number of children using SAAP services. It is of interest to note that in that period, a total of 53000 children accompanied a parent entering a SAAP service, of which 88 per cent were 12 years of age or under.<sup>8</sup> By 2004-5 the number of children in this category rose to 56,800.<sup>9</sup> In addition to accompanying children a further 11,200 aged from 15-17 directly sought SAAP services in 2004-5. These figures almost certainly understate the extent of the problem. They provide only one, albeit an important, source, of

its magnitude. However, they exclude homeless people who do not seek SAAP services and children under 16 years of age who are living apart from their parents but do not qualify for, or alternatively do not receive, SAAP support.<sup>10</sup>

The Council to Homeless Persons, the Victorian peak body in this area highlighted this latter problem in a submission to the Victorian Government in 2005 when it said:

*“In 2003-04 there were 510 young people aged 12-15 who were independent clients of homelessness assistance services in Victoria. These young people often find it difficult to access Centrelink payments (those under 15 are not entitled to Centrelink income), are often unable to remain at school, and have extremely limited accommodation options.”<sup>11</sup>*

Presumably, if applied across the whole of Australia, there would be about 2000 children in this category.

In a 2004 report, the Melbourne based welfare organisation Hanover Welfare Services estimated that at least 90,000 Australian children experience homelessness each year. Of these nearly half are aged 0-4 years and 43 percent are of primary school age.<sup>12</sup> That would seem to be an estimate that is in line with others and a very troublesome one. Further it is clear that the situation is not getting any better.

We have recently celebrated, if that is the appropriate word, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rule of the Howard Government. As part of those celebrations the media has been reporting that a substantial majority of Australians rate economic management as one of its great achievements.

That might be so for the comfortable or aspirational (read greedy) or even the deluded, but it is certainly not so for those at the wrong end of the economic spectrum in this country. Unfortunately that includes far too many of our children. If anything their situation has worsened during the 10 years of the Howard Government, which has done precious little about their plight. An outstanding Australian, Professor Fiona Stanley said in a speech to the National Press Club in Canberra in August 2003

*“--our economic progress has not delivered better outcomes for children and families in Australia nor has it reduced the disparity across the social divide.*

*The levels of these problems are now so high that services are already stretched in providing for them and all indications are that they are continuing to increase. While expensive 'band-aids' seem to be what the community are clamouring for, they will never deliver the long-term effective solutions to these problems, some of which may be coming entrenched in some groups in our community and crossing generations of families."*

That situation has, if anything deteriorated in the nearly three years since she made that statement.

It is therefore a national disgrace that we have done nothing to correct what is an eminently correctible situation. Surely the situation of children and youth should be a first and not a last priority, as it currently seems to be. We are not a third world country and we have untold wealth. We should hang our collective heads in shame that any Australian child is now living in poverty or is homeless.

Perhaps Richard Walsh was right in a recent Sydney Morning Herald article concerning the response to the death of Kerry Packer when he said;

*"According to the latest polling, a majority of Australians accept that they are being governed by a divisive and mean-spirited leader, but apparently they no longer care. It's a "Whatever it takes" world we live in now. If it takes lies to stay in power or bribes to sell our wheat, no matter. We cling to our tenuous prosperity as though Howard were its only begetter and as if money really can buy us happiness."*<sup>13</sup>

The attitude of the Howard Government to children and the importance that it gives to matters affecting them can be gauged by the fact that having taken the step of appointing a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs that office was downgraded to that of a Parliamentary Secretary in 2004 and has now totally disappeared. We still have no Children's Commissioner and the treatment of the children of asylum seekers, while outside the purview of this address, is a good example of what the government is prepared to do to rather than for children.

As was pointed out by Deb Tsorbaris, The Chief Executive Officer of the Council to Homeless Persons earlier this year, the Federal Government reduced homeless program funding in 2005-6 by 9 per cent. She said: "the situation for families who are homeless will be compounded by their

potential loss of income under the new welfare rules being implemented in July next year”.<sup>14</sup>

Those new welfare rules have now come into force and although modified to some extent by National Party pressure; it is obvious that they will further exacerbate the problem of homelessness. The programme is euphemistically described as “Welfare to Work”, which, on the face of it has a laudable object. However, like so many of this Government’s initiatives, it is necessary to look beyond the show to the substance. It follows similar programmes in the US, which one commentator has described as follows:

*“The welfare-to-work “solution” can be thought of as a match made in hell. It puts poor mothers who need the most support and flexibility into jobs in low-wage labor market which often are the most inflexible [and] have the least family-necessary benefits (Albeda 2000, p.32)<sup>15</sup>*

This comment was quoted by Helen Cameron in a recent paper as providing a prescient reflection of the future of many families in Australia under the current welfare-to-work provisions. She says that what we are now seeing is the erosion of the concept of welfare as an entitlement and its replacement by one of obligation to engage in an exchange. She points out that:

*‘All such procedures target those who are disadvantaged by virtue of socio-economic status, education or other personal and social qualities which place them outside the mainstream market.’<sup>16</sup>*

She concluded her paper by commenting:

*“As suggested by Hamilton and Denniss, ‘The ideas of nation building, investing in our children’s future and protecting the most vulnerable, although preserved in the rhetoric, have vanished in the reality of modern politics’. Finally, Carney urges policy maker(s) to differentiate between welfare administration offering ‘sanctions’ rather than ‘incentives’. Encouraging people to gain rewarding work appropriate to their circumstances has benefits for all, but welfare-to-work provisions appear to be a discipline imposed on those already beleaguered by disadvantage.”*

The sort of approach embodied in Welfare-to Work typifies the neo-conservative approach to these issues, namely one of prejudice, mean spiritedness and victimisation. This becomes all the more reprehensible when the victims are children and young people, who should be given the opportunity to participate in the nation’s wealth and future.

The Executive Director of Catholic Social Services Australia, Frank Quinlan, after describing the legislation as immoral, summed up the situation well when he commented that there were three major flaws in the new legislation, these being that it is too harsh and that vulnerable people are not protected by and should not be included, that those whose income has been suspended should have an avenue to re-enter the scheme once having complied with the requirements and thirdly that more resources are needed to address barriers to work, such as mental illness.<sup>17</sup>

Incredibly, but consistent with Federal Government attitudes, Catholic Social Services was attacked by a Government Minister, Joe Hockey for deserting its constituents in taking this approach. In doing so it is of interest to note that Catholic Social Services were aligned with the Uniting Church, Anglicare, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence and Mission Australia. It is perhaps not without significance that the Government's supporters from the religious right, and in particular the Hillsong Church, had no such qualms. The blatant hypocrisy of the Government's position is staggering. It has not only introduced legislation that many welfare agencies regard as immoral and wrong, but it also expects them to police it for them and when they refuse, the Government attempts to take the moral high ground and turn the criticism against them.

In the circumstances there appears to be substance in a comment made recently by Labor's shadow Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, concerning the Prime Minister when he said:

*“Mr Howard is a clever politician who often succeeds in masking the essential self interest of his political project with a veneer of “duty to the nation”. Mr Howard’s politics are in the main about concealing the substantive truth of his policy program because - as with his new industrial laws – when fully exposed to the light of public debate, their essential truth is revealed: a redistribution of power from the weak to the strong”.*<sup>18</sup>

Why is it just left to the organisations providing services to the homeless and people like Fiona Stanley and other private citizens like myself to take up the running on this issue? Even the service organisations have their difficulties in making public complaint, because of the vindictive attitude of this Federal Government to criticism, but to give them credit, they have not been subdued by this.

Why is it not the subject of much greater attention by the Opposition or minor parties, or in the media. Perhaps even Family First might be interested when not attending to the interests of the Packer family. Are we really such an uncaring society, or is it that we just have uncaring leaders that we are not sufficiently committed to remove from office?

The historian, Mark Peel of Monash University put the issue very well in a recent article when he said:

*“And who is asking the crucial questions about a society in which more of life’s rewards will flow from the competitive struggle for jobs and resources and wealth? What happens to the young, for example? Who protects the weak? What are the moral and collective responsibilities of people who are advantaged by talent and skill? What are the obligations of those whose wealth and security accrues largely from the luck of inheritance or timing? What do we do with people who aren’t very capable, or who aren’t even interested in doing the things for which we are prepared to pay a decent income, or whose vocation perhaps lies in caring for children and the elderly or being a good parent? Most of all, perhaps, what happens to the losers? These failures of imagination and fairness lie nearer the top than the bottom of Australian society. If there’s a crisis, it is not a crisis of welfare dependency or inefficiency or alienation. It’s a crisis of compassion. It’s a crisis of obligation, from the lucky to the unlucky, the old to the young, the insider to the outsider, those rich in confidence and chances to those who despair of either.”<sup>19</sup>*

Peel also comments on the fact that our society is less fair than it was, provides less money for social mobility and more for privilege preservation and stupidly reduces the stock of public housing, as has occurred over recent years. In March of this year the Melbourne Age quoted The Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Council of Social Service, Cath Smith, when referring to the Victorian Government’s reduction in funding for public housing from \$258.9M to 139.2M as saying;

*“The appalling shortage of public housing has created such a bottleneck in crisis services that newly homeless families are being turned away.”<sup>20</sup>*

This is the very time when interventions are likely to be most successful and the ignorance that drives policy decisions like this is truly troublesome. The problem faced by the Victorian Government in this regard is very much the responsibility of the Federal Government through the Commonwealth –State

Housing Agreement, the funding for which has been steadily reduced by the Commonwealth.

Given this background it was with a sense of bitter irony that I read in the Australian newspaper in an article written in 2004:

*“More than 100,000 Australians will join the ranks of the wealthy over the next four years, increasing their collective investment portfolio to \$157 billion.”*

The article went on to say that the ranks of Australia’s rich had swelled by 47% in the past five years and that this growth rate was expected to accelerate by a further 54% over the next four years. The study upon which the article was based was confined to liquid assets such as cash stocks and bonds and did not take real estate or offshore holdings into account, which may well boost their net wealth by threefold or more.<sup>21</sup> The market went up about 20% last year, so it was probably a significant underestimate.

In this context it is interesting to examine the Non-Government Report on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child of May 2005 which noted:

*“The Committee’s 1997 Concluding Observations expressed concern “at the spread of homelessness amongst young people in Australia”, and feared that “homeless children were at risk of involvement in prostitution, drug abuse, pornography and other forms of delinquency and economic exploitation” (paragraph 18). Homelessness remains a significant human rights issue for children in Australia. While it is difficult to determine the number of homeless children in Australia, the figures that are available are disturbingly high. On census night in 2001, 36,000 children were counted as homeless. Data based on requests for homelessness services reveal higher numbers of Australian children experiencing homelessness: a total of 64,800 children and youth accessed a homelessness service in 2002-2003. Australian children become homeless for many different and complex reasons. These reasons include:*

- *family violence and abuse;*
- *substance misuse and health issues (particularly mental health issues);*
- *poverty;*
- *a shortage of affordable accommodation (brought about by dramatic cuts in funding for public housing and rising costs of private housing); and*
- *Aboriginality, in that Indigenous children are more likely to become homeless.*

*Homelessness not only threatens a child’s right to a standard of living adequate for his or her physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, it is also likely to be associated with violations of other rights in the Convention, having adverse impacts*

*on children's health, education, economic security, and their relationships with family and community. Homelessness has also been shown to place children at risk of substance abuse and sexual exploitation.*'<sup>22</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, assiduously encouraged by the present Federal Government, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is neither radical nor biased and if anything, rather conservative. This is what it had to say in the relevant portion of its report of 30 September 2005, having received reports from both the Government and the NGO's:

*57. In light of article 27 of the Convention, the Committee recommends that the State party increase its efforts to provide affordable housing options and take all possible measures to raise the standard of living of indigenous children and children living in rural and remote areas.*

*58. The Committee further recommends that the State party address and systematically investigate the consequences of economic hardship on children, with a view to developing measures aimed at reducing its negative impact on children's healthy development.*

*65. While the Committee welcomes that the State party is seriously considering the issue of youth homelessness, including with the National Homelessness Strategy (NHS) and the "Reconnect" program, it wishes to express concern at the situation of homeless children, which are also more likely to be affected by educational and relational problems and are more exposed to substances abuse and sexual exploitation.*

*66. The Committee recommends that the State party intensify its efforts in order to address the urgent needs and rights of homeless children, especially as to their housing, health and education. Furthermore, the State party should provide homeless children with adequate recovery and social reintegration services for physical, sexual and substance abuse and to promote reunification with their families, when feasible.*<sup>23</sup>

The report is hardly a ringing commendation of Australia's efforts in this area.

All this is not to say that the Federal Government has done absolutely nothing. The problem is that it and most State Governments have not done enough. As the UN Committee Report noted, various programs such as SAAP, the National Homelessness Strategy and Reconnect exist and some monies have been made available. However governments show a chronic lack of commitment to spending or doing enough in this area.

If the same largesse and zeal the Federal Government showed in building detention centres for asylum seekers, or in invading Iraq, were directed at those in our society who are unable to house themselves we would not have a problem.

I now propose to deal separately with the issues identified as constituting the causes of homelessness in the NGO submission quoted above.

### **Family violence and abuse**

This is all too common in our community and we have been slow to take appropriate steps to combat it. This is not the place to discuss this issue in detail, but its relationship with homelessness is obvious.

Access Economics, commissioned by the Office for the Status of Women estimated that the overall cost of domestic violence to government and community was \$8.1billion in 2002-3.<sup>24</sup>

The Non-Government Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child identified four areas of continuing concern in 2005. These were:

- The lack of follow up on notifications of children at risk of harm as a result of exposure to domestic violence;
- Problems in dealing with domestic violence and child abuse allegations in family law proceedings;
- Concerns for children on contact visits and;
- The lack of services for children under 12.<sup>25</sup>

If appropriate action is not taken and if there are no suitable services, the association between this problem and homelessness becomes apparent. There is no real option open to the victims of domestic violence than to leave with the children – frequently at very short notice - and find such other accommodation as they can.

The usual pattern is that women and children are driven out of their homes by violence, and the financial circumstances of the parties are often such that issues of child support are often illusory. It is no surprise that such a large proportion of SAAP clients are single mothers and children. The 2004-5 figures show that virtually one quarter of all SAAP clients are females with

children, and that over half of this group reported their main reason for seeking SAAP relief as being domestic violence or physical and emotional abuse.

The Non-Government Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also strongly recommended that all Australian governments support and apply in policy and practice, the general principle that children and young people should be recognised as clients in their own right and entitled to access services, particularly in relation to the provision of housing and support from domestic violence programmes. In particular, it made recommendations that the SAAP programme recognise children under 16 accompanying adults as clients and provide adequate crisis accommodation for such children and their families.<sup>26</sup> This has not only not been done but, as we have seen, it cannot provide adequate crisis accommodation to meet the demand.

In my view it is a problem that must be approached in a number of different ways. While domestic violence is a crime and should be dealt with as such, the mere imposition of retributive sentences on perpetrators is not likely of itself to alleviate the problem. In the short term what is required are better methods of early intervention, improved child protection programmes and more services. Such programmes must also be co ordinated and ongoing. A recent study noted:

*“There are currently few models of intervention for children outside women’s refuges. Workers who have regular contact with children require basic skills for understanding and addressing the problems that may emerge for children living with domestic violence. In addition the development of resources and training for workers utilising a strengths-based approach is a priority.”<sup>27</sup>*

In the longer term what is also required is a national attitudinal change to violence and bullying, and the educational programme to achieve this should start in the schools. In this regard at least there are signs that the Federal and some State and Territory governments are treating the issue seriously with National Safe Schools Programmes and the like. There must also be a complete re-think of male attitudes towards women, coupled with a rejection of the notion that children are some sort of property to be dealt with by parents as they think fit.

## **Substance misuse and health issues (particularly mental health issues)**

In this area both Government, commercial interests and the community as a whole bear a heavy responsibility for the problems that have developed, and which in turn contribute heavily to homelessness and poverty.

I think it important when considering substance abuse to make no mistake that the really serious area of substance abuse that affects more people than any other is the abuse of alcohol. Despite the wide media coverage they attract, narcotics affect a much smaller group in the community than does alcohol. Problems such as petrol sniffing, while very serious, are largely confined to the rural indigenous community to which I will turn separately.

It is beyond the scope of this address to consider the many ways in which substance abuse contributes to poverty and homelessness, but the connection between the two is well known. In particular such abuse is closely associated with unemployment, domestic violence, relationship breakdown and severe health effects, which in the case of young people affect their employability and education.

All of this suggests to me that unless we as members of the public stand up and be counted on these issues, the enormous contribution of alcohol to problems such as poverty, homelessness and ill health will continue. It is a difficult argument to run against the pressure brought by industry and in my view the only way in which we can succeed is by shaming government into action, if necessary through the ballot box. To do that however we need opposition parties that will stand up and be counted on issues such as this, and in the present political environment we might well feel some sense of despair as to the likelihood of this happening.

I make it clear that I am not advocating prohibition, but what I do advocate is much greater controls upon alcohol advertising, a review of the taxation of alcohol products and the prevention of the production of products specifically aimed at the youth market. Also, it would not be unreasonable to apply a portion of the profits from the industry to the alleviation of problems caused by it, such as homelessness.

None of this is to underestimate the problem posed by other drugs in contributing to child homelessness. This problem will not be overcome by

the present mindless punitive approach to drug taking which has proved to be manifestly unsuccessful. Although it is on a mercifully lesser scale than the draconian approach of certain South East Asian countries it remains about as unsuccessful. The Non-Government Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child pointed out that 40 per cent of adolescent children reported that they had used an illegal drug in the previous 12 months and that the Government's persistence in a criminal justice rather than a health and harm minimisation approach is not assisting the provision of proper services in this area.

This approach also means that young people who are involved with drug taking will be reluctant to seek assistance from community services where such services are available. The extent of drug use amongst young people is an increasing problem and its association with homelessness is well known. Further, substance abuse problems are often caused by, or contribute to, mental health problems.

As to mental health I would again commend the recommendations of the Non-Government Committee Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The report pointed out that a recent national study of the mental health needs of young people concluded that 14 per cent of school-aged children have mental health problems that are comparable in severity with problems seen in children actually attending a mental health clinic.

It also pointed out that homeless children often have high and complex needs due to a history of maltreatment and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health problems and that there is a lack of appropriate accommodation and services for these children.

Its recommendations were:

***“That there be a national program of mental health services for children and young people, especially services for children in rural and remote areas and culturally appropriate services for Indigenous children that have regard to:***

- (a) the need for specific in-patient units for young people with acute mental illnesses;***
- (b) education programs on mental health, self-harm***

*and suicide prevention, particularly in rural and remote areas;*  
*(c) specialist training for child and adolescent mental health practitioners;*  
*(d) improved provision of GP mental health services for children and young people;*  
*That there be a continued commitment to school based counselling and referral services;*  
*That drug and alcohol use by children and young people be monitored to determine the need for services;*  
*That health intervention for all mental illness (including substance misuse) be premised on harm minimisation;*  
*That the prescription of psychotropic medications to children be monitored and reviewed with a view to developing guidelines for the prescription of psychotropic medication for children.”<sup>28</sup>*

The Federal Government has recently and belatedly announced some initiatives in the area but it remains to be seen whether there will be substance in what it proposes.

## **Poverty**

*“According to the 2004 United Nations Development Report, Australia has the highest levels of poverty among the highly developed nations, excluding the United States. Conservative estimates are that 145,000 young Australians aged 15-24 years were living in poverty during 2000, with half of these young people estimated to be living at home. One in six Australian children reportedly live in a family where there is no one in paid work.”<sup>29</sup>*

The UN Committee’s report was as follows:

*“The Committee also notes that the State party has not defined an official poverty line and is concerned that the impact of poor living conditions on the well-being and development of children is not adequately considered.”<sup>30</sup>*

This is an appalling indictment of the economic management of this country, not only by the Federal Government, but also by the respective State and Territory Governments as their responsibilities overlap in this regard. The connection between poverty and homelessness is obvious.

The US Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman made the point well as reported in a recent Sydney Morning Herald article as follows:

*“THE Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman visited Australia last week. Unusually for an economist, he had a simple message to deliver: our societies are underinvesting in early childhood intervention programs. By neglecting the opportunity to help disadvantaged children at a young age, we are raising the cost of addressing these problems later in life. Potentially, a dollar spent on early childhood programs is a dollar saved in building new jails.”*

The author of the article, Andrew Leigh, an economist at the Australian National University commented:

*“This message should have a profound impact on policymakers. For the most part, societies like Australia and the US have been reluctant to intervene to provide parenting skills to those struggling to raise their children. Yet in our squeamishness about crossing the line between public and private, we may be missing out on the best opportunity to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, or as Heckman puts it, the biggest credit constraint is the inability of a bright child to buy good parents.”<sup>31</sup>*

The Brotherhood of St Lawrence in a recent publication had this to say.

*“In the midst of plenty, too many Australian children are being brought up in poverty. This is a scandal that casts serious doubt on our future as a nation of the fair go. It must be addressed now or a new generation will mature without knowing that being Australian means one thing above all else – having an equal chance in life.”<sup>32</sup>*

We therefore have internationally renowned economists pointing out that the continued toleration of poverty makes no economic sense. They join with experts in poverty and its effects upon children like the Brotherhood of St Lawrence *who warn of the dangerous situations in which too many of our children live*. What then are those responsible for the economic management of the country in Canberra and elsewhere doing about this problem? What sort of economic managers would permit this situation to continue?

**A shortage of affordable accommodation (brought about by dramatic cuts in funding for public housing and rising costs of private housing)**

The Government's decision to not only maintain the non-applicability of capital gains tax to the place of residence but also to halve it in relation to other forms of investment and continue with negative gearing, has fuelled the greatest housing boom that Australia has seen. This in turn has had devastating effects upon those at the vulnerable end of the economic spectrum who are looking for housing. The boom has placed upward pressure on rentals and has driven poor families to increasingly inaccessible housing on the urban fringe, well away from centres of employment and from suitable services. This has had particularly deleterious impacts on single parent families and those reliant on public transport. As we have seen in recent newspaper articles in the Melbourne Age, many of these people are living in sub-standard hovels and in rural areas in equally sub-standard caravan parks.

This has been nothing more than an indication of the cynical manipulation by Government of the Australian people and pandering to a basic human weakness as this Government has so often done; in this case greed.

While those who own the houses might see themselves as benefiting, those who do not are faced with an ever widening gulf that can only be assuaged by banks engaging in the economic lunacy of offering deposit free loans.

What is often forgotten is that as a result of this boom the pool of have-nots has extended to include young couples with children who are in employment but who are faced with housing prices far beyond their means.<sup>33</sup> A feature of our society is its increased longevity which means that the transfer of wealth between generations takes place at a much later stage than it used to, and amounts may well be reduced by the increasing needs of the elderly for expensive medical and nursing home care. This has meant that many of this group no longer have any reasonable expectation of alleviating their housing problems from inheritance, at least while their children are young.

The Government has so far successfully allayed the concerns of the younger generation with band-aid solutions such as first home grants, which in fact are barely enough to buy the furniture. I note from press reports that it is thinking about increasing these grants, but any such increase will be a mere drop in the bucket in the context of our housing prices. The fact that these grants are not means tested is yet another example of Government cynicism and its desire to pander to the wealthier section of the community. The Government of course has a political vested interest in keeping housing

prices high, but it will not be able to stem the tide by these means in the context of any economic downturn.

These policies have already significantly increased the problems of the people who are presently homeless but the consequences of any economic downturn upon young people trying to enter the housing market and in particular a fall in housing prices will be devastating and any such downturn will inevitably lead to an increase in homelessness. We have been living through a period of unparalleled prosperity to date and although the housing market has slowed in Sydney and to a lesser extent Melbourne, it is booming in some areas like Perth and Darwin and showing steady growth elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> The question is will it last?

According to the recent report of the Australian Housing and Urban research Institute:

- “Based on a low cost budget standard estimate of non-housing needs:*
- 1.4 million lower income households have insufficient income after meeting their housing needs to maintain a frugal standard of living*
  - these represent 44 per cent of all lower income households.”<sup>35</sup>*

It is important to remember that we are not talking here about homeless people but we are certainly talking about people who are potentially likely to become homeless in the event of any economic downturn.

At the same time there has been a significant decline in the availability of low cost rental housing which has been coupled with a significant increase in demand. The report of the Social Policy Research Centre to which I have previously referred, in reviewing the relevant literature in 2005, commented:

*There was general agreement throughout the literature that the level of provision of public housing was inadequate and declining (Lindsay, 1993: 6, 154; Neil and Fopp, 1994: 112, 116-17; Casey, 2001: 80; Bartholomew, 2002; ACOSS, 2003: 2, 11; Beer et al, 2003: 8; CHP Victoria, 2003: 17; Clay, 2003; Hanover Welfare Services, 2003: 2). CHP Victoria said that public housing stock comprised 6.5 per cent of Australian dwellings, but that many people waited a long time for public housing, sometimes indefinitely (CHP Victoria, 2002). AFHO said that SAAP’s aim to make its clients independent was not being achieved because of the lack of affordable and appropriate housing as exit points from SAAP, as well as by ‘the impact of high rates of unemployment and poverty, and the diversity of the problems faced by SAAP clients’*

*(AFHO, 2003a: 7). ACOSS said there were over 200,000 people on waiting lists for public housing, and that CSHA funds continued to shrink, a situation made worse by the fact that state housing authorities were being forced to use current funding to meet already existing liabilities, instead of providing new housing (ACOSS, 2003: 2, 11).<sup>36</sup>*

The Australian Financial Review Article referred to above quotes the chief economist at AMP Capital Investors as saying “**Australia’s housing remains 20 per cent overvalued and is amongst the worlds most expensive.**” Again this does not suggest that the Government’s claims of sound economic management are justified.

**Aboriginality, and the fact that Indigenous children are more likely to become homeless**

This is a topic in relation to child homelessness that is much broader than can be fully addressed in the course of a presentation such as this. It is a complex and difficult problem but nevertheless an important aspect of the national shame associated with our toleration of the continued existence of child poverty and homelessness.

It is an area in which we are the subject of continued and justified international criticism. As a report published by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence said recently, after referring to a number of relevant studies:

*‘What these studies highlight is that despite the economic resources available to us, there remain severe inequalities in health, development and well-being. While the majority continue to move ahead, too many children-especially indigenous children and those from low income families- are being left far behind.’<sup>37</sup>*

The Report indicates for example that Indigenous children’s mortality rates are more than twice that of the total population and Indigenous children are particularly at risk of being born underweight, again at a rate double that of the general community. Indigenous children are twice as likely not to reach reading, writing and numeracy benchmarks as other children and this becomes more marked by year 7 Such children are disproportionately in the child protection and juvenile justice systems, and the incidence of child abuse and neglect is disproportionately high compared to the general population, largely due to the severe socio- economic disadvantage faced by

many Indigenous communities. The report notes that poverty is the most frequent and persistently noted risk factor for child abuse.

Similarly the Non-Government Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child makes the point that indigenous children are grossly over-represented in the Australian homeless population, yet less likely to be assisted by homelessness services. The report points out that while the task is difficult to tackle, research and consultation has highlighted the specific problems with current policy and service delivery and made constructive suggestions for improvement.<sup>38</sup>

The UN Committee made the following recommendations:

- 75. Despite the numerous measures taken by the State party's authorities, including the Indigenous Child Care Support Programme, the Committee remains concerned about the overall situation of indigenous Australians, especially as to their health, education, housing, employment and standard of living.*
- 76. The Committee notes the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) - a key policy advisor to the Government and its agencies on indigenous affairs- which has been replaced with a government's ministerial taskforce.*
- 77. The Committee recommends that the State party strengthen its efforts to continue developing and implementing – in consultation with the indigenous communities – policies and programmes ensuring equal access for indigenous children to culturally appropriate services, including social and health services and education. The Committee further recommends that an evaluation of the new arrangements for the administration of indigenous affairs take place soon in order to assess whether the abolition of ATSIC has been in the best interests of the indigenous children.*

It is an extremely troublesome situation for this country to be criticised by a UN Committee in 2006 upon this basis, given our economic prosperity and the opportunities that we have had to act to improve the situation. It is simply not good enough to say it is all too hard because if we think that we have problems with the Indigenous community now, those problems will be compounded in the future if we do not act to provide Indigenous children with an equal opportunity to other children in our community.

The current edition of Australian Children's Rights News contains a series of articles directed (inter alia) to health and housing of Indigenous children. The editors comment that there is now clearly a crisis in these areas.<sup>39</sup>

One author makes the following graphic points:

*But this isn't good enough – the statistics speak for themselves. There are a high number of newborns well below a healthy weight, and who have been exposed to high levels of alcohol in-utero. These children are at high risk of retarded development and adulthood kidney disease. Children living in Central Australia have the highest recorded rates of rheumatic fever anywhere in the world – a disease that is almost unheard of outside of aboriginal populations in this country. Rates of skin infections, lung suppuration, and infectious diarrhea are comparable to children living in poverty in Africa.*

*The hardships facing these people are complex and inter-related. The poor health of children can only be understood in relation to the communities from which they come. The incredibly high rates of infectious disease are a direct consequence of very overcrowded housing. Malnutrition, commonly seen in children under three years of age, is due to chronic infectious gastroenteritis in childhood, a lack of healthy food choices at the community shops, poor understanding of healthy living, and social and cultural realities. Poor literacy rates are secondary not only to poor educational facilities, but also to community attitudes and poor health. And malnutrition and failure to thrive impair a child's ability to learn, further impairing literacy attainment.*

We have seen recently that the Federal Government's response to this problem is to seek to demonise Indigenous people and to seek to shift the blame for its policy neglect in providing reasonable support for indigenous people to the States and Territories and to engage in meaningless but dangerous changes to the criminal law aimed at preventing courts from taking cultural factors into account in sentencing Indigenous people.

### **The Way Forward**

Quite obviously there is a complex series of steps that need to be taken to remedy the disastrous situation which faces homeless children in Australia. What is troublesome is that there appears to be no sense of urgency on the part of the Federal Government to act to do so.

What we do know is that there has been useful research and that there are solutions. In 2004 I had the honour of launching a longitudinal study carried out by Violet Kolar on behalf of Hanover Welfare Services in Melbourne.<sup>40</sup>

That study showed that by addressing the problem of homelessness as a first priority, it gave a much better opportunity to address the other problems suffered by the respective families, such as poverty, ill health, inadequate education of children and behavioural problems. As the report points out, “a

complex range of reasons had precipitated the families' housing crisis. These included relationship and family breakdown, domestic violence, physical/emotional abuse, financial difficulties and substance abuse. A number of families had been evicted from their housing, largely due to rent arrears. Prior to their housing crisis, some families had experienced relative housing stability. In terms of house moves, for example, over half (51 per cent) had moved only once or twice in the two-year period before the study. In fact, 40 per cent had lived in the one house for between two and seven years, while 9 per cent had between 10 and 22 years residency in one dwelling".

I think that an important point to be made from this is that homelessness is not confined to the sort of person so often demonised in the media as shiftless and irresponsible and sponging on the rest of the community. It can strike at any family for a number of reasons. This can include families who have hitherto enjoyed long term stability. An accident at work, economic misfortune or an untoward death can pitch a family into homelessness through no fault of their own. The effects are equally traumatic if nothing is done for the family.

Another important point is that the effect of domestic violence in bringing about these situations should not be overlooked. It is no accident that this study involved many single mothers who had been the victims of domestic violence. There is no doubt that most victims of domestic violence are women and the rate of domestic violence roughly accords with other studies such as those carried out for the Family Court of Australia<sup>41</sup>. If some real action could be taken to lower the incidence of domestic violence, the beneficial effects are obvious.

What does give ground for optimism however is the conclusion demonstrated in the report as to the beneficial effects upon families and particularly children of a stable housing situation. This was a longitudinal study of 42 families over a two year period, who had received assistance to the point where most were in a relatively stable housing situation during that period. It suggests that if this can be achieved, while the problems of the families will not be solved, nor will they no longer need some form of assistance, their situation will be greatly improved, particularly for the children involved.

During the course of the study, the report notes that the health of the children improved markedly, to the extent that after two years of housing stability, only 2 children were on medication and only 5 children had to grapple with the impact of ill health on their schooling and other activities. School absenteeism halved as had the time spent away from school through ill health. Stable housing also had a positive effect on school performance, parent/child relationships improved and the children's sociability improved.

This aspect of the report concluded:

*“Overall, the findings emphasise the significant impact of stable housing to the development and wellbeing of children. A child simply cannot be expected to thrive if that child is homeless. It is imperative, therefore that homelessness experienced by children be targeted and eliminated.”*

It is important to point out that when one speaks of a stable housing situation in this context, one is not speaking of home ownership, but rather rental housing either in publicly provided housing or in privately rented housing. The prospect of home ownership is completely off the horizon for these families and for that matter for many others as the result of the recent property boom.

I commend to you some of the concluding words of the report:

*“Homelessness encompasses a complex mix of structural and personal difficulties. Therefore, the elimination of homelessness requires a comprehensive and multi-layered approach. Thus, it is essential to ensure the availability of good quality and affordable housing; while employment and training opportunities are crucial so that families can escape poverty. Without addressing these policy issues, homelessness will continue, and family wellbeing and stability, particularly in the longer-term, will be compromised.”*

The Brotherhood of St Lawrence has called for a community campaign against child poverty, the adoption of targets for reducing child poverty, new measurements of child poverty so we can hold Governments and ourselves to account. The Kolar report referred to above has taken a similar approach as has the Non-Government Report to the UN committee on the Rights of the Child.

I adopt that call and suggest that we all do so in the hope that we can alleviate this disgraceful situation in our community. It is more than time for

another Burdekin type inquiry into this problem. The present Government seems to be unwilling and incapable of action but there is no reason why an incoming Labor Government should not do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Oberin, J. (2002), 'Early intervention in the welfare sector' *Parity* August

<sup>2</sup> Rosella Scutella and Paul Smyth; The Brotherhood's Social Barometer; Monitoring children's chances; The Brotherhood of St Lawrence 2005

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, *Our Homeless Children*, Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children, Chairman Brian Burdekin, Canberra, AGPS 1989

<sup>4</sup> Kate Norris, Denise Thompson, Tony Eardley and Sonia Hoffman; *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme*, Final Report, Social Policy Research Centre, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2005

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Norris et al at p 2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Norris et al at p 31

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 25 February 2006;

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/mediacentre/2006/mr20060228.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> AIHW 2003

<sup>9</sup> AIHW 2005 <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/hou/saapndcar04-05/saapndcar04-05.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> The Non-Government Report on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia, May 2005 p 48

<sup>11</sup> Council to Homeless Persons, Submission in Response to Victorian Government White Paper, "Protecting Children: The Next Steps, p6, September 2005,

<sup>12</sup> Violet Kolar, 'Home First: a longitudinal study of outcomes for families who have experienced homelessness' Hanover Welfare Services 2004

<sup>13</sup> Richard Walsh; "Only a Meaner Nation could turn Kerry Packer into a Secular Saint;" Sydney Morning Herald, 25 February 2006

<sup>14</sup> Nassim Khadem; The Age, Melbourne Wednesday 1 March 2006

<sup>15</sup> Randy Albeda, 'What's Wrong with Welfare-to-Work(reality check for legislators about mothers in the low and no wage workforce)' Dollars and Sense, Issue 231, September October 2000

<sup>16</sup> Helen Cameron; *Poverty and Family Life under Welfare-to-Work: The Continuing Failure of Welfare Policy*, University of South Australia, Social Policy Research Group, Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies (2006)

<sup>17</sup> Frank Quinlan; *Catholic Social Services refuses to police "harsh" Govt policy*, October 2006, accessed at <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=1778> 20 October 2006

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Rudd *Faith in Politics*, The Monthly, (Melbourne October 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Mark Peel; Arguing for a Fairer Australia (accessed 25/2/06)

<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2006/02/peel.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid Nassim Khadem; The Age, Melbourne Wednesday 1 March 2006

<sup>21</sup> "Rich get richer-and more common" The Australian 22 July 2004

<sup>22</sup> The Non-Government Report on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia May 2005 pp47-8 [http://www.ncylc.org.au/croc/images/CROC\\_Report\\_for\\_Web.pdf](http://www.ncylc.org.au/croc/images/CROC_Report_for_Web.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Accessed at <http://www.ncylc.org.au/croc/home.html>

<sup>24</sup> Access Economics (2004) *The cost of domestic violence to the Australian economy: Part I and Part II, Partnerships against Domestic Violence*, Office for the Status of Women, Canberra

<sup>25</sup> Ibid the Non-Government Report (supra) at pp. 32-33

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- <sup>26</sup> Ibid the Non-Government Report (supra) at pp. 33 and 48
- <sup>27</sup> Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Program (2003) p. 11
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid the Non-Government Report at p. 44
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid the Non-Government Report at p. 73
- <sup>30</sup> Paragraph 56 The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations, 30 September 2005
- <sup>31</sup> Andrew Leigh; *Sydney Morning Herald* 15 February 2006
- <sup>32</sup> The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: Children's Chances; Brotherhood of St Lawrence 2005  
[http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL\\_Social\\_Barometer\\_Children.pdf](http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/BSL_Social_Barometer_Children.pdf)
- <sup>33</sup> <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs/doc953.pdf?CFID=639904&CFTOKEN=66910488>
- <sup>34</sup> Robert Harley; "Sun Shines on House Prices" Australian Financial Review 25-26 February 2006
- <sup>35</sup> Judith Yates and Michael Gabriel; *Housing Affordability for Lower Income Australians*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, February 2006
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid Norris et al at p 31
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid *The Brotherhood's Social Barometer; Monitoring children's chances*; p. 1
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid The Non-Government report at p. 49
- <sup>39</sup> *Australian Children's Rights News*, issue 41, p 4, October 2006 ISSN 1320-7091
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid Violet Kolar (supra)
- <sup>41</sup> A recent analysis of judgments in children's matters, heard between January and June 2003 in the Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane Family Court registries, examined the frequency with which allegations of family violence had been made against a member of the child's immediate or extended family. The analysis showed that violence was a factor in 68 out of the 91 matters judicially determined during that period. (Submission of the Family Court of Australia to the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs Inquiry into Joint Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation, Part B, Statistical Analysis (September 2003))