Presentation by Tony Nicholson to St Peter’s Eastern Hill dinner, November 15th 2018.

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I’m pleased to be able to join you this evening in support of the great work undertaken by St Peter’s and the Lazarus Centre. And thank you Krystyna for your kind introduction.

As Krystyna indicated in her introduction, much of my working life has involved me, one way or another, in the endeavour of trying to alleviate and prevent homelessness – from the time in the early nineteen eighties as a young social worker working amongst the homeless in inner urban Melbourne through to my time as head of the Brotherhood of St Laurence and even now in this, my “gap” year.

That time as a young social worker in the early eighties was very formative for me. During those years, I estimated that I conducted almost 5000 structured social work interviews with people who were homeless - with men, women, families and youth. From that experience I gained lasting insights that continue to shape my approach to the issues of poverty and exclusion that plague our otherwise prosperous society.

The first has to do with aspiration. All too often our public policy responses to these issues seem to imply that people who find themselves in these circumstances somehow lack aspiration. And as a consequence of this perception, punitive measures are considered to be needed to “activate” them. I found that not to be the case. In all those thousands of conversations I had with people who were homeless, whoever they were and whatever their circumstances, I inevitably found that they aspired to a mainstream life, even whilst in the depths of their despair. No matter how troubled or how desolate the paths trudged, I learnt they have modest aspirations – to have a decent place to live, to be able to work or be useful in some form, and to have a sense of family or community, to belong. They didn’t aspire to be part of an underclass.

The second insight has to do with this idea of participation. Like you and I, the vast majority of people in our society build a reasonably good life for themselves – a life of common dignity, a life without shame and exclusion by being able to participate in the mainstream economic, social and civic life of our community.

But to be able to participate, people need both the personal capability and the opportunity to do so. All too often the homeless lack one or the other. Not infrequently they lack both. Personal capability involves having good health, interpersonal skills, a reasonable education attainment, vocational skills, self-confidence, relationships and networks. But personal capability isn’t enough unless they have opportunities to participate. This is where our public policies are critical, particularly concerning how we manage the economy and create jobs and regulate the world of work, how we plan our cities and provide housing and transport, and how we prevent discrimination and exclusion.

And so, these foundational understandings concerning aspiration, participation, capability and opportunity were central to the approach I brought to the task the Victorian Government asked me to undertake last year – that of developing a strategy that would significantly reduce levels of rough sleeping in this state.

The phenomenon of homelessness is complex and can be easily misunderstood. And so, as with any strategy development task, the first challenge was to get an accurate appraisal of the current situation and what might lie ahead. I was able to do so by reviewing the various data sets on homelessness, and by talking to many of the service providers, as well as people who were experiencing homelessness.

From this there were several key findings that helped shape the eventual strategy.

Whilst on any one night there are about 1800 people sleeping rough, the majority will have only recently become homeless and they will sleep rough for relatively short periods – certainly less than a month. This is not to discount the impact of their experience. Any period of rough sleeping, no matter how short, is dangerous and degrading. For a minority, less than twenty percent, their rough sleeping becomes chronic. They will most likely experience complex health and social problems and require persistent and intensive help to resolve their homelessness.

The majority are men aged between 20 and 50 years of age. Women and families and youth are represented but they tend, not unreasonably, to be to be given priority in the service system due to their particular vulnerabilities. This reflects the choices a service system overwhelmed by demand, has to make.

Whilst rough sleeping is most visibly concentrated in inner Melbourne, it is relatively evenly distributed across the state. Seventy percent are found in the middle and outer suburbs and in the country.

And the people we see on the streets of the CBD and inner suburbs aren’t folk who have lived in these locations and fallen on hard times. Rather, their lives have unravelled elsewhere and, over time, they have gradually drifted to inner city areas in search of services. As a consequence of not having their homelessness resolved early, and in their communities of origin, their health and general well being will have deteriorated significantly by the time they reach the inner city. Consequently, they are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health and be dogged by addictions.

There were few surprises in the causes I found for the increase in rough sleeping over recent years. The most significant causes of the increase lay with the some of the big changes that have been taking place in our economy for more than a decade – in particular the high cost of housing combined with the decline in the number of low skilled entry level jobs and the inadequacy of the Centrelink unemployment payments.

In terms of housing, for the people I’m talking about, it’s the market for rental housing that is relevant. Last year, only half of one percent of all lettings in the private rental market in Melbourne were able to be afforded by a person solely dependent on a Centre link unemployment benefit. With a maximum Centrelink entitlement of $338 (including rent assistance) per week, an unemployed person without the support of family or friends is rendered destitute. If they pay a rent, then they can’t feed themselves adequately, let alone incur the expenses involved in searching for work.

I was surprised to learn that almost half of the people who sleep rough are deemed by Centrelink to be actively in the labour market, and as a consequence, are subject to job search rules and requirements to attend meetings. Of course, given their circumstances, it is well-nigh impossible for them to comply. This may, at least in part, explain why about fifteen percent of Victorians sleeping rough had no income at all.

Traditionally we think of public or social housing as a viable option for such people. It is no longer, simply because it is so scarce. As a proportion of total housing stock, it has been in decline for decades and now makes up only about three percent of total housing stock.

And whilst poor physical and mental health and various addictions are a cause of the homelessness of some people, I found solid research that demonstrated they are equally a consequence of homelessness. This is an important reality that is not often recognised. Such is the distress involved in lengthy periods of rough sleeping, for many it leads to a breakdown of mental and physical health and the acquisition of addictions, or at least the problematic use of various forms of drugs.

Nonetheless, poor physical and mental health and addictions remain causes of rough sleeping for significant numbers, but they are a minority.

Now this all paints a bleak picture. It can’t be turned around quickly. The recommended strategy urged a long-term approach. Any significant reduction in rough sleeping will take a concerted effort over several years because it involves the failings in big public policy areas at the national and state levels.

Housing supply affordable to lower income households, and Centrelink payments to the unemployed are still matters crying out for urgent and major reform.

Another area crying out for urgent reform is our national system of employment assistance known as Jobactive. All the evidence points to it being next to useless in helping the highly disadvantaged job seekers we are talking about.

The strategy I put forward also recommended that the priority location for additional investment in homeless service infrastructure in Victoria has to be in the suburbs and country so that the slide into rough sleeping can be arrested earlier, and the drift into the city centre prevented. Thankfully these investments are beginning to be made.

In inner city Melbourne, services need to be maintained at their current level but there needs to be greater collaboration between the various service systems – whether they be health and hospitals, welfare, housing and employment services, the police or local government authorities. This is tricky to achieve but progress is being made.

Many of you will be aware of the many informal voluntary services in touch with people sleeping rough in the inner city. They bring the likes of food, shower and laundry facilities, clothing and blankets. They have much to offer, particularly where their material offerings are accompanied by friendship. But they could be much more constructive in their work if they were encouraged to collaborate more closely with the more professional services that are funded by governments. They can, and do at times, become part of the problem, by bringing many of the aspects of a home to the person sleeping rough, inadvertently leading them to be sustained in their rough sleeping, rather than assisted out of that situation.

The recommended strategy also makes the point that the objective of simply giving shelter to people is not enough. They need help to build their capability for the participation I have spoken of, so that they can take their place in the mainstream of our community where they can be happy and useful.

For many, this has to involve developing skills for work and having the opportunity to practice those skills and gain work experience.

For all, it involves establishing relationships and building community around them. Too often I encountered people who had been fortunate enough to be allocated affordable housing, but for all intents and purposes they continued living a homeless lifestyle. They had been given shelter, but they hadn’t been given the experience of community or a sense of purpose to their life.

And finally, the strategy made the point that the task of reducing rough sleeping is one that should not be left to governments but should be shared across the community. We all have a role to play. Governments and their agencies aren’t good at creating the opportunities for establishing relationships and building community. Neither, I’m sad to say, are many of the major charities that governments fund.

So I am sure you can see why I am excited by the initiatives St Peters and the Lazarus Centre have underway and for which they ask our support.

The Lazarus Centre recognises the shared humanity we have with the homeless who come to the centre. It recognises that deep down these people aspire to be part of the mainstream. It recognises that they need help in building their capability for mainstream social and economic participation, and of course, it recognises that healing best comes through relationships and through the experience of community.

I finish with a brief story from where I started.

Thinking back to the early eighties when I was working amongst the street homeless, I sometimes reflect on one man – Wayne. When I first met him, he had just turned 21. For several years he had been addicted - primarily but not exclusively - to prescription drugs. He’d been in the child protection system for many years as a youngster. He had never had a job. By any measure, his life chances looked miserable.

He was fortunate to meet a colleague of mine, a social worker who had a tremendous faith in the ability of people to transform their lives.

Whereas many would have written Wayne off, he didn’t.

He didn’t send him for detox or therapy. That had been done before without effect. Instead he kitted Wayne out in what I remember as a somewhat gaudy work uniform: shirt with lapels, overalls, safety boots, the lot, and set about enrolling him in a series of short courses. Literacy and numeracy, hospitality, OH&S in the work place, materials handling, gardening, basic computer operations. Over about a two-year period, Wayne did them all – always proudly wearing his uniform.

The key to this program of self-improvement was that it tapped into his aspiration to be useful, to be able to work - and he was being supported in building himself up. There were setbacks along the way, but eventually Wayne defeated his addiction and landed a permanent job with a food manufacturing company.

Now I didn’t hear anything of him until about twenty years later when I ran into him in the South Melbourne market. He brought me a coffee. We sat and we chatted for the better part of an hour. He was doing well. He’d built a good life for himself. Indeed, much to my surprise, he started talking to me in great detail about his superannuation strategies.

I find Wayne’s story of change instructive and it always reinforces my sense of hope. I trust it does yours too.

Thankyou

End.