

# We Ourselves

Dr John Falzon

Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia

National Launch, CEO Sleepout

Matthew Talbot Hostel, Sydney 19 April 2010

We are discussing homelessness on Aboriginal land. I pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land. I pay tribute to the spirit of resistance and hope. The St. Vincent de Paul Society has been present in Australia since 1854. We are ordinary people standing shoulder to shoulder with ordinary people who are doing it tough.

The greatest thing we can achieve through events such as the CEO Sleepout is to erode the false and harmful notion that homelessness is something that happens to “them” rather than “us”.

The most necessary social change is that “we” as a society recognise that “we” are the ones from whose ranks the people experiencing homelessness come. The person who is denied the right to a home is not some kind of alien “them” but rather “one of us”.

We must all learn to say “we”, “ours” and “us” rather than “they”, “theirs” and “them”. This change of thinking, more than anything else, will change the way Australia addresses the causes of homelessness.

This change has the power to make us think twice about whose problem this is and whose responsibility it is to solve it.

Homelessness is not simply the absence of certain fundamental rights. It also represents the way we, as a society, push people out and leave them there.

People are pushed out because of a private rental market that does not offer a way in or a way to stay in. People are pushed out because of the lousy income support levels they are forced to survive on. How can you live on less than \$33 a day? People are pushed out because of violence, especially against women, children and young people. People are pushed out, imprisoned and then pushed out again and sometimes imprisoned again! Because being locked up follows hot on the heels of being locked out. People are pushed out because they don't get a fair go in accessing healthcare, education, training or employment.

People experiencing homelessness are denied the right to appropriate housing. But there is more. There is the insecurity, the vulnerability to illness, to violence, to prosecution, the feeling of disconnectedness, the feeling of being seen right through as if you are not there.

Some see a person experiencing homelessness and reflect that our system is not working. Others, in my opinion more astute, see a person experiencing homelessness and conclude that the system *is* working. It is working because inequality lies at its heart; because inequality is seen as both a necessity and a virtue.

We at the St Vincent de Paul Society reject the notion that people should continue to be blamed for being pushed out.

We also reject the notion that social problems are best solved by simply allowing the market to run its course in an unfettered fashion. Or that the principle corrections can be supplied by charity for those who allegedly fall through the cracks.

The founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society, Frederic Ozanam, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French activist academic, once wrote:

*"Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attack."*

Charity, be it warm or cold, is no substitute for justice.

Philip Mangano, former executive director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, said on a recent visit to Sydney that US studies showed half those coming through the front door of homelessness services had just emerged from foster care, mental health care, incarceration and even military service.

He said that addressing homelessness improved once homeless people were consulted as part of the process.

*"They don't ask for a pill, a program or a protocol. They ask for one thing first - they ask for a place, a place to live."*

Homelessness is not a reflection of individual failure. Homelessness is a reflection of social failure, economic failure, political failure.

We must move away from the falsehood that the problem of homelessness is primarily a matter of individuals changing themselves.

Australia stands near the bottom of the list of relative social expenditures in comparison with OECD countries. Of the 27 EU countries assessed over 2004-06 all but one (Greece) invested a higher proportion of GDP in social expenditure than Australia. The EU25 average (23.4%) was almost twice that of Australia.<sup>i</sup> I say this without apology at a time when many voices are calling for ruthless cuts to our social spending. Let me make this clear: our social spending relative to our wealth as a nation is the measure of our humanity.

This is why we need to think of homelessness as a matter of justice that matters to each of us. As Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland put it so beautifully:

*“If you have come to help me you are wasting your time.  
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together.”*

*John Falzon*

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<sup>i</sup> Source: OECD Social Expenditure