

Tearing down the walls

Launch of the 2011 Vinnies CEO Sleepout

Sydney, 12 April 2011

Dr John Falzon

We are discussing homelessness on Aboriginal land. I pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land. I pay tribute to their 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.

I remember some years ago learning a difficult but beautiful lesson about life. I was invited to attend a meeting of recovering drug addicts who were parents. They were working on a book together. This was a way of telling their stories. I am a firm believer in the healing power of stories, the transformative power of stories. Well, their stories certainly transformed me. They described the ways in which they had taken drugs in front of their young children, the pain they felt they had inflicted on their children and themselves, their stories of making enough money to survive, feeding their children and supporting their habits. Some of the women described the difficulties of balancing work and family while working in the sex industry. The words that have remained with me in the strongest way, however, are the words of a young Aboriginal woman, describing her experiences of homelessness and frequent incarceration based on racial discrimination. When, naively, I asked her what it was like to be locked up and whether, at least she was able to sleep, she told me, quietly but firmly:

"The cells are a sad place, brother. You don't get to sleep in the cells."

The lesson I learned was contained in the one word in the middle of this woman's deeply poetic utterance. It was the word, "brother".

She bestowed this title on me through no merit of my own. I did nothing to prove any real kinship with her. Nor could I possibly claim to know what her experiences were like.

When she did this she did something very powerful. She took me into the cells with her. She showed me how sad they were.

She could no longer be someone whose life is alien to mine.

She belonged to the same world as me.

I belonged to her world, the world of the jail cells, the world where her sadness was the sadness of the world.

The Vinnies CEO Sleepout is all about trying to learn a little and share a little about the world of homelessness in a wealthy country. Whether we like it or not, we are all, in reality, part of that world.

The CEO Sleepout is not just about raising money. It's about changing minds and hearts. It's about changing negative attitudes to people doing it tough; people who are usually demonised but who, I believe, should be deeply respected and admired for their tenacity and inventiveness.

Our problem in Australia is not the "idleness of the poor", as perniciously proposed by welfare-bashers of all political stripes. Our problem is inequality. This is a social question, not a question of behavior. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behavior, blaming people for their own poverty, as is so often the case with people who are homeless or in jail because of society's failure to provide them with opportunities and to nurture their talents.

People are enclosed by massive walls built around them on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the "aspiration" to scale these walls.

The CEO Sleepout is not about a group of privileged people explaining how to scale the walls.

On the night of June 16th, the CEO Sleepout will be about a group of business and community leaders wanting to learn from the people who live in the guts of our greatest social problem.

It's about having the humility to listen to the people who can teach us what it is that needs to change in society.

It is about committing ourselves to join in the long-haul project of tearing down the walls that we have built around people, locking them out, or locking them up.

Australia stands near the bottom of the list of relative social expenditures in comparison with OECD countries. Professor Peter Saunders of the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW has been telling us for nearly a decade that it would take an expenditure of 2-3% of GDP to lift all people out of poverty in Australia. In his words:

"We can thus pay to remove all Australians from poverty if we want to: the fact that we don't do so is a matter of choice, not affordability."

It is indefensible that in a country as prosperous as ours we still have, on conservative estimates, 105,000 people experiencing homelessness, nearly half of whom are under the age of 25.

It is indefensible that we continue to expect a single unemployed person to survive on \$34 a day, a daily battle that is waged from below the poverty line.

The Federal Government's Homelessness strategy aims by 2020 to halve homelessness and to ensure that all rough sleepers are offered accommodation. The St Vincent de Paul Society is committed to assisting in the achievement of these concrete goals.

But we must, as a nation, address the massive shortfall in social housing in order to meet these targets. We must also comprehensively address the national crisis in mental health.

I put it to you that 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 rather than charity.

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."